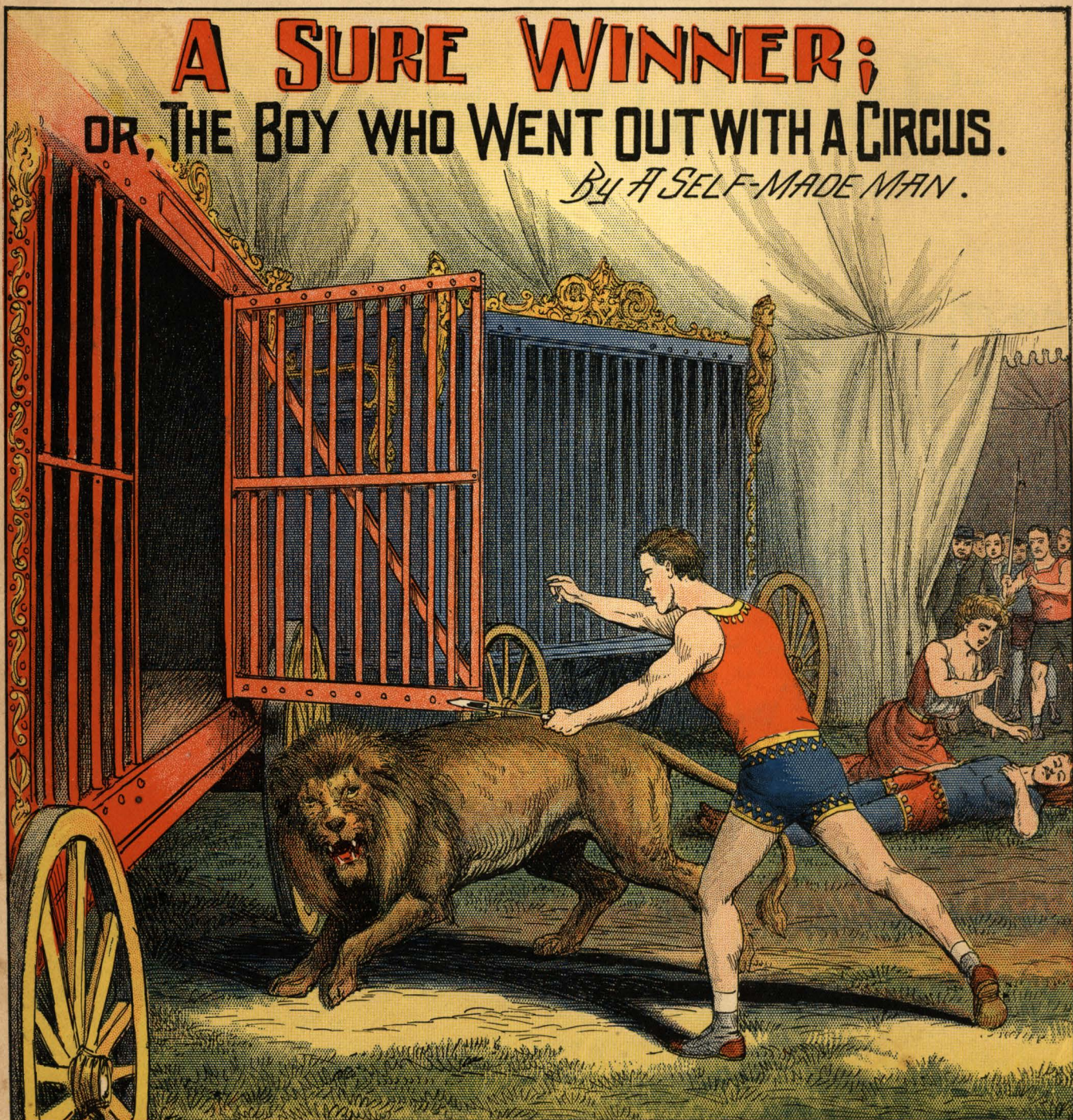


FAME AND FORTUNE WEEKLY.

STORIES OF
BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY.

A SURE WINNER; OR, THE BOY WHO WENT OUT WITH A CIRCUS.

By A SELF-MADE MAN.



The lion sprang back with a smothered growl, and seemed as if about to leap upon his aggressor; but the lad, undaunted by the peril he was facing, followed up his first advantage, and literally drove Rajah back to his cage.

Fame and Fortune Weekly

STORIES OF BOYS WHO MAKE MONEY

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A SURE WINNER;

OR,

The Boy Who Went Out With a Circus.

By A SELF-MADE MAN.

CHAPTER I.

IN WHICH LUKE BAGLEY YIELDS TO TEMPTATION.

"See here, Nick, where are you goin'?" asked Luke Bagley, a big, lazy-looking boy of fifteen, with a sallow complexion, protruding, lobster-like eyes, and a turned-up nose of scant proportions, of a bright, red-cheeked lad of fourteen, attired in shabby garments that did not fit his supple, well-knit frame.

"I'm going into the field to hoe potatoes," answered Nick Long, without pausing in his walk.

He had a long hoe in his hand, and his brown curly hair was covered by an ancient broad-brimmed straw hat as a protection against the summer sun.

"Well, I'm goin' fishin', and I want you to go into the garden and dig some worms for bait. Do you understand?" said Luke, in a commanding tone.

"You'll have to dig your own worms this time, Luke. Your father told me to go into the field right away."

"Never mind what my father told you. Do as I tell you. You can go to the field afterward."

"I've got to obey your father, Luke," replied Nick, pausing to open a gate leading into the lane.

"Do you mean to say you won't do as I tell you?" cried

Luke Bagley, advancing upon his father's hired boy in a threatening manner.

"If I don't do as your father tells me, you know he'll take a cowhide to me."

"That ain't my business," grinned the big boy, maliciously.

"Well, it's my business," replied Nick, resolutely, opening the gate.

"Here, stop! Come back and dig those worms for me. There's a can," and Luke tossed an old tomato can toward Nick.

"Can't do it," replied the hired boy, pulling the gate to after him.

"I'll pay you up for this, see if I don't," snarled Luke, in a fit of anger at the boy's refusal to obey him.

Nick Long paid no further attention to him, but went on his way toward the potato field.

He was getting tired of Luke Bagley's overbearing and tyrannical behavior toward him.

He would have resented it long before but for the fact that Luke was always sustained by his mother, a sharp-featured, penurious woman, with a disposition resembling vinegar, who thought her only son was about as perfect as boys come.

Mr. Bagley also backed his son up, as a rule, when ever

it was a question of veracity between his spoiled heir and the hired boy.

This Western farmer, who was an obstinate, not over-intelligent man, had taken Nick from the poor farm when the boy was ten and had treated him more or less as a slave ever since he had been on the farm.

He grudgingly permitted Nick to attend school during the winter months, because that was one of the conditions of the contract, and because work about the place was naturally slack at that season.

In this way Nick managed to get nearly six months' tuition at the district school every year, while Luke received the benefit of the full term—from the beginning of September to the end of May.

As Luke was not over-bright, and was inclined to shirk his studies, the hired boy learned twice as much as he did in two-thirds of the time.

This fact was one reason why Luke hated Nick and tried to make life unbearable for him.

There were plenty of other reasons, also, to keep alive this animosity, not the least of which was that everybody who knew Nick liked him, because he was naturally polite and even-tempered, while Mr. Bagley's son was just the opposite.

Nick was a very industrious and conscientious worker on the farm, but he did not get any credit for it, just the same.

When the busy times were on he was driven hard, and got roundly abused, into the bargain, when the farmer looked about for some one on whom to vent his ill-humor.

About once in fifty times the boy might have deserved a slight calling down, but he had grown accustomed to being bullyragged by the whole family, whether he deserved the layout or not, and had grown callous to it, in a way, though none the less the injustice of it all cut him to the very soul.

All Nick knew about his parentage was what the overseer informed him the day he was apprenticed to Mr. Bagley.

He was born in Salem village, his mother, who was a stranger to the place, dying almost immediately after his birth, of an epidemic.

As there was no clue to his mother's identity, she was buried in the village cemetery, in a sunny corner of the lot, and the infant was taken to the poor farm, where it thrived and grew into a bright and intelligent lad.

This was the sum and total of Nick's history.

What his real name ought to have been was a mystery, but the omission was supplied by the overseer of the poor farm, and under the name of Nick Long the lad was bound out to William Bagley.

It was hot work hoeing potatoes on that July morning, and Nick was glad when he heard the horn sound for dinner.

Not that he had any great anticipations of a bountiful repast awaiting him in the kitchen of the farmhouse, though he was hungry enough to do justice to a big, square meal.

The fact of the matter was, Mrs. Bagley set a very mean

table, and, skimpy as it was, Nick invariably came in for the short end.

Occasionally when the minister called and stayed to tea, or they had other company, which wasn't often, Mrs. Bagley baked an extra pie or cake and pan of biscuits; then Nick managed to have almost enough to eat.

One member of the household succeeded in getting about all he wanted in the eating line, and that, as the reader may suppose, was Luke.

If there was a deficiency on his side of the house at any time, he set up a strenuous kick, with the result that somebody else had to suffer, and it is hardly necessary to mention who the chief sufferer was.

When Nick entered the kitchen, after washing up at the pump, he found the family already at the table.

There was a small piece of meat on his plate, about two bites, and a hunk of stale bread beside it, with a full glass of milk.

Luke had already consumed his allowance, and had just managed to secure half of the hired boy's share; that was why Nick had so little with which to try and satisfy a healthy appetite.

He never thought of raising an objection to the meagerness of his fare.

That would have been looked upon as rank rebellion to the established custom of the house, and he would probably have been deprived of the little there was as a fit punishment for such presumption on his part.

"Pa," said Luke, gobbling down an apple turnover that had been specially cooked for him, "there's a circus in Brentville to-day."

Brentville was a big town on the railroad, about six miles from the farm.

"Humph!" grunted Mr. Bagley.

"I want to go."

"I hain't got no time or money to waste on circuses," replied the farmer, ungraciously, for his best horse had gone lame that morning, and in consequence he was in bad humor.

"Ma, can't I go?" persisted Luke.

"I ain't got nuthin' to say," she answered.

"It'll only cost me fifty cents."

"Fifty cents is a lot of money," said Mrs. Bagley.

Nick, who was quietly listening to the conversation, agreed with the lady of the house.

Fifty cents was a lot of money in his eyes, for he had never owned that much in his life.

"I can't afford no fifty cents," said Mr. Bagley, setting his teeth firmly together. "I've got to buy some tobacker, and one thing and another I need at the store, this afternoon."

Luke saw it was useless to press the matter, and he scowled across the table at Nick, as if he was the cause of the disappointment.

Just then there were the sounds of wagon wheels in the yard, and Mrs. Bagley rose hastily and looked out through the window.

"There's the butcher," she said. "We must get a nice

juicy piece off the round, as the minister is comin' to supper this evenin'. Give me some money, pa."

"How much do you want?" asked the master of the house, reluctantly putting his hand into his pocket for such stray coins as he carried there.

"Half a dollar will do."

"I don't see no sense buyin' so much meat," objected Mr. Bagley.

"We've got to make a show before the minister, pa," she replied.

Evidently it was like drawing a tooth to separate the farmer from so large an amount as fifty cents, for he passed the silver piece over to his wife very grudgingly.

Nick saw Luke follow the money with longing eyes.

Mrs. Bagley laid the money on the kitchen dresser and then went out to haggle with the butcher, who always put the price up to her first, because, from experience, he knew he had to reduce the price to make a sale.

Mr. Bagley presently got up from the table and went out to the barn, leaving the two boys alone at the table.

Nick had his famished eye on a hunk of bread which lay on the bread dish, and he was wishing Luke would follow his father, so he could get it, for he knew if the boy saw him appropriating the thick slice he would immediately report the fact to his mother, and that would mean a rection.

Ordinarily Luke would have suspected Nick's design and have frustrated it, but just now his thoughts were wholly absorbed with the circus.

From where he sat he caught the glitter of the fifty-cent piece where it reposed on the corner of the kitchen dresser, and the sight of it made his mouth water.

Finally a desperate plan came into his head.

He was just crazy to go to the circus, and he was ready to take some chances in order to gratify his longing.

He left his chair suddenly, went to the door leading into the yard and looked out.

His mother was talking to the butcher beside the wagon.

Then he looked back and saw Nick reaching for the slice of bread.

Instead of yelling at the hired boy, as he naturally would have done, he simply grinned, and, tiptoeing toward the dresser, reached out his hand and grabbed the piece of money.

As he did so, Nick looked around quickly to see if Luke had really gone, and he was intensely surprised to observe the theft.

After securing the money, Luke walked in an unconcerned way to the door and went outside.

"My gracious!" ejaculated Nick, aghast at the action of the son of the house, "he's stolen the money to go to the circus."

If he hadn't been so hungry he would probably have rushed out after Luke to remonstrate with the boy, as he possessed very rigid ideas as to the heinousness of such an offense.

He decided to take Luke to task about the matter later on and make him disgorge.

Then he refilled his glass from the milk pitcher and hastily swallowed the last of the bread, after he had liberally buttered it.

The milk followed the bread, and he even had the hardihood to take what was left in the pitcher on top of that.

As the table was now quite bare of everything in the eatable line, Nick wiped his mouth and started for the barn, almost running into Mrs. Bagley, who was preceding the butcher into the kitchen.

Nick saw Luke disappearing behind the barn, and he followed him.

As he turned the rear corner of the building he heard the shrill voice of Mrs. Bagley calling after him, but so intent was he on recovering that half-dollar from her son that he paid no attention to what she was saying.

Luke was standing in the sunlight gloating over the possession of the fifty-cent piece.

Nick came up behind him and laid his hand on his shoulder.

With a cry of alarm Luke started back, and the coin dropped to the ground.

Nick stooped down and, picking it up, coolly put it in his pocket.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH THE HERO OF THIS STORY FINDS HIMSELF IN A GRAVE PREDICAMENT.

"Give me back that money, you beggar!" cried Luke, furiously.

He had recovered himself on seeing it was only the hired boy, and the latter's nerve in taking possession of the precious coin made him wild with anger.

"You stole that money from the kitchen dresser," replied Nick, accusingly.

"I didn't do no such thing. Hand it over."

"I saw you take it not more than five minutes ago."

"You're a liar!"

"You know I am telling the truth, Luke. It is an awful thing to rob your mother."

"I never took the money," snarled Luke, viciously. "It belongs to me, and I want you to give it up."

"I am going to return it to your mother."

"You ain't going to do no such thing," cried Luke, appalled at the idea of not only losing the money, but being branded as a thief as well.

"Yes, I am, Luke."

"I'll kill you if you dare do such a thing," exclaimed the spoiled boy, rushing at Nick and trying to kick him in the shins.

The hired boy was much stronger than he looked—stronger, in fact, than his older and heavier opponent, and he managed to hold him off.

"Give me that money, I say," screamed Luke, almost foaming at the mouth with rage.

"No," replied Nick, decidedly. "It belongs to your mother."

Luke looked around for a stone, but, not seeing one, he was about to make another mad rush, when his eye lighted on a cowhide whip hanging against the side of the barn.

He snatched it down from the nail and, dashing at Nick, brutally struck him across the shoulders and neck.

"Don't you do that again, Luke," cried the hired boy, aroused by the sting of the heavy whip-lash.

But Luke intended to do it again, and raised the whip on high for that purpose.

Nick, however, had stood as much as he was going to stand.

He dodged quickly, rushed in under his enemy's arm and, reaching up, snatched the cowhide from his grasp.

Luke gave him a vicious kick in the leg.

"I'll have to teach you manners," cried Nick, giving him a smart lash about the legs.

Luke roared like a wounded bull.

Mrs. Bagley had run down to the barn after the hired boy, and met her husband coming out of the building.

"What's the matter, Sarah?" asked the farmer, noticing her excited manner in some surprise.

Before she could open her mouth they heard Luke roar from behind the barn, and both rushed to see what was the matter with their precious boy.

They appeared on the scene of trouble just as Nick raised the whip again on pretense of giving the boy another taste of its tickling qualities.

"You villain!" screamed Mrs. Bagley, rushing at the hired boy like a wildcat. "Are you tryin' to murder my son?"

She snatched the whip from him and brought it down with all her might on Nick's back.

With a gasp of pain, Nick jumped back out of reach of the infuriated woman, and began rubbing his bruised arm where part of the blow had landed.

"Save me, mother!" cried Luke. "He wants to kill me."

The enormity of the offense fairly staggered Mr. Bagley, and he simply stood back and gazed at his hired boy with a look of horror.

"Tried to kill my son, did you, you wretch!" cried Mrs. Bagley, threatening Nick with the whip. "What is the world comin' to, I wonder?"

"I didn't hurt him any," replied the hired boy, doggedly.

"Didn't hurt him, you villain! Don't tell me that! Didn't we hear the poor boy cry out as if he was bein' murdered?"

"He struck me with all his might, ma," whimpered Luke, trying to create sympathy for himself.

"Where did he hit you? Not in a vital spot, I hope?" anxiously.

"Yes, he did, ma," cried Luke, eagerly. "He hit me in a vital spot, and maybe I won't recover."

"Oh, you snake in the grass! You thief, you!" screamed the angry woman.

"Thief!" gasped Nick.

"Yes. Where is that half-dollar you stole from the kitchen dresser?"

Nick was fairly paralyzed at the accusation.

Luke heard his mother's words and his little brain saw a way out of his dilemma.

"He's got it in his pocket, ma," he cried, eagerly.

"Got it in his pocket, has he? I dare say. Give it up, you viper!"

"Luke took that money," said Nick, desperately. "And I took it away from him, intending to return it to you."

"Don't you believe him, ma. I didn't do no such thing."

"Of course you didn't, my precious one. You wouldn't do such a thing."

"No, I wouldn't, ma. I wouldn't steal from you."

"How dare you accuse my innocent boy of such a crime, you pauper!" cried Mrs. Bagley, advancing on Nick with upraised whip.

The hired boy retreated before her.

At this point Mr. Bagley got a bright idea into his head.

He was only playing second fiddle where he was, so he withdrew from his position, ran around the barn and, appearing at the other side, dashed out at Nick and caught him by the arms, making him a prisoner.

Nick struggled desperately to escape, but the farmer was a strong man, and he soon found that he was helpless.

"That's right, William," said his wife, approvingly. "Now put your hand into his pocket and get that money he stole."

"I'll give it to you if you'll let me," cried Nick.

"No, you won't," said Mr. Bagley, grimly. "I can help myself without any assistance from you."

He dived his hand into one of Nick's trousers pockets and brought up the money.

"There it is, Sarah," he said, exhibiting the silver piece.

"The little thief!" ejaculated Mrs. Bagley. "To think we've been a-warmin' a viper in our bosoms all these years!"

"I didn't take that money, ma'am," persisted Nick. "Your son took it off the dresser, and I came out here after him to make him give it up."

"Oh, ma, that's an awful lie!" chipped in Luke, hastily. "Of course it's a lie!" agreed his mother, darting a hard look at the hired boy. "Will you stand for havin' your only son falsely accused, William Bagley?" she added, addressing her husband in forcible tones. "That boy deserves a horse-whippin'."

"And he's goin' to get it, too," replied the farmer, giving the luckless youth a severe shaking.

"That's right, pa. Give him a good one. He meant to kill me. I'm sore all over where he hit me," and the little hypocrite began to feel of his legs and arms and body in a tenderly suggestive way, in order to incite his father against Nick and make his whipping the more severe.

He knew he had been euchered out of the circus, but if he could have the satisfaction of either seeing or hearing the hired boy get the licking of his life he felt that would be a partial compensation for the loss he suffered.

"I'll lick him till he can't stand up," said Mr. Bagley,

who, as we have already mentioned, was not in a good humor, and he intended to relieve his feelings by making his hired boy suffer the keenest anguish he could inflict upon him.

Nick, in the course of his four years of servitude, had received several whippings at the farmer's hands, but had managed to evade the worst part of them by breaking away and getting out of range.

Still, he had acquired evidence enough that Mr. Bagley could wield a cowhide with stinging effect.

Owing to the seriousness of the present situation, as well as the farmer's crossness, he was afraid Mr. Bagley would take pains to prevent him from escaping the full penalty this time.

His fears were realized when Mr. Bagley said, grimly:

"I'm goin' to tie you up to a post in the barn, you little scamp, and when I get through with you you'll wish you'd never been born."

"Can I see you do it, pa?" asked Luke, with sparkling eyes, licking his chops in anticipation of the glorious chance to gloat over the squirming hired boy.

"No, you can't," snapped his parent, much to Luke's disappointment.

"Never mind," he whispered to himself. "I'll crawl under the barn and listen to the fun. Won't it be just glorious!"

Mrs. Bagley, after receiving back the half-dollar, had withdrawn from the scene to settle with the butcher, who had been impatiently awaiting her reappearance.

So her husband, gripping his victim tighter, to be sure he wouldn't get away, dragged the unfortunate boy around into the barn and tied him up to a convenient post.

"Here's the whip, pa," grinned Luke, appearing at the door with the instrument of torture.

Mr. Bagley was preparing to shut the door in his graceless son's face, when a carriage drove into the yard and a stranger, alighting from it, presented himself at the kitchen door.

Mrs. Bagley received him with company manners, and, learning that the gentleman had called to see her husband on particular business, called out to Luke:

"Tell your pa to come to the house right away."

CHAPTER III.

IN WHICH OUR HERO COMES FACE TO FACE WITH A REAL CIRCUS FOR THE FIRST TIME.

"I'll attend to your case when I return," said Mr. Bagley to Nick, throwing the whip on the barn floor. "It will do you good to think over what you're going to get. I'm going to take the hide off your back this time," he growled, menacingly. "I'm just in the humor for it. I'll bet," darkly, "you'll never forget this lickin' as long as you live."

With that he left the barn, securing the big door behind him.

Luke, who was curious to learn what the stranger wanted, followed him to the house.

Thus Nick, for the time being, was left alone.

His thoughts were not pleasant ones, you may well believe, but how different they would have been had he known what was transpiring in the sitting-room of the farmhouse, whither the visitor had been invited.

How could he guess that fortune at last was about to smile on him!

On the contrary, he could see nothing but the darkest of shadows lowering about him.

He expected nothing else than that Mr. Bagley would half-kill him on his return to the barn.

"If I could only manage to get rid of this strap that holds me I'd run away. I wouldn't care if I starved. I'm half-starved, as it is, anyway. I'm treated as if I were a slave. I don't see why I have stood it so long. Any other boy would have run away long ago. Well, I guess I've reached the limit. It'll be the last whipping he'll ever give me, but I do wish I could avoid it somehow. It's pretty tough to stand a cowniding. Nobody but a coward would treat a boy of my age so cruelly. Mr. Bagley is only a brute, anyway, and as for Luke——"

Crack!

The strap confining his arms had suddenly given way, for while he was muttering the foregoing he had been straining hard at his bonds.

"Thank goodness, I'm free!" he ejaculated.

Picking up the broken strap, he looked at it.

"The old thing was rotten. It's a lucky thing for me that Mr. Bagley is too mean to provide himself with decent harness. The first thing I'm going to do is to put that horsewhip out of his reach."

There was a big knothole in the flooring, and Nick thrust the rawhide into it, and it fell somewhere out of sight.

"The next thing is to escape from the barn, and after that from this neighborhood. I've had all I want of Mr. Bagley. I've earned my board and second-rate clothes several times over since I've been here. It's about time I earned a dollar or two in money for myself. I'd like to go to school a while longer, but I suppose I'll have to give that up now. Probably I'll get a chance to study evenings when my time is my own."

The fact that Mr. Bagley had secured the big barn door when he went up to the house did not greatly disturb Nick. He knew there were two closed window openings—one in the back, through which manure was tossed, and one in the side of the barn.

He could put his hand on either in the dark, consequently it was an easy matter for him to find one of them now.

He unbarred the rear one, glanced out to see if the coast was clear, and, finding that it was, he jumped out.

As a precautionary measure he looked around the corner of the barn in the direction of the farmhouse.

"Gracious!" he exclaimed, with a quiet chuckle. "I got out just in the nick of time, for here comes Mr. Bagley

now. I wonder what he'll say when he finds I have cut my stick?"

Ah! Young Nick Long! If you had know what Mr. Bagley wanted you for now you would have rushed to meet him, instead of flying for the nearest fence and vaulting it, and then running across the meadows as fast as you could go.

Nick was making the mistake of his life just then, but as he didn't know it, why, it didn't trouble him.

And it was several years before he found out how Dame Fortune had rolled his way on her wheel that bright July afternoon, and how, just as she had stretched out her hand to seize him, he had eluded her.

Well, such is life, after all.

If this wasn't a true story—a few pages out of the life of one of the brightest young men for a time connected with the circus profession—why—but what's the use saying anything about it?

It wasn't because there was a circus at Brentville that Nick directed his steps in that direction.

A battered dime was the extent of his finances, and that was wholly inadequate to pay his way inside the "big top," as it is called, where the glories of spangles and sawdust are displayed before the admiring gaze of a delighted multitude.

No; it was because Brentville was a good-sized town on the railroad, and he hoped to pick up a job there, that Nick aimed for it.

It was about six o'clock when Nick approached the outskirts of the town, and, as luck would have it, almost the first thing he spied was the circus tent, for it was only a single-ring affair, with its group of smaller canvas tops strung about under its lee.

The afternoon performance was over some time ago, and there wasn't a spectator in sight.

Even the small boy enthusiast who, gorged with happiness, had kept pace with the parade earlier in the day, had gone home to eat, preparatory to a return to the scene when the excitement was renewed under the glare of the flaring naphtha torches.

As Nick stood with arms thrown over the top of the far fence, gazing with a kind of wondrous awe upon the sun-kissed tents, with their waving flags and streamers hanging listlessly in the calm air, the quiet of a Sabbath afternoon seemed to rest upon the field.

Finally the boy got over the fence and crossed the field toward the tents.

Evidently he wanted a closer view of a scene that was new and novel to him.

The performers had had their evening meal, and some of them were gathered on the greensward back of the tents.

The women were busy with fancy work and sewing; the men talking over the gossip of the ring.

Inside the "big top" the long stretches of seats barren of spectators, the equestrian director was disciplining an obstinate horse.

No one paid any attention to Nick as he walked slowly around the canvas walls and wondered when the time would

come when he would have the price that would admit him to the wondrous show of which this was a type.

For the time being he forgot the cravings of an ill-fed stomach, as well as the weariness which a six-mile walk along the dusty roads had brought to his limbs.

He was gazing upon the outside of a real circus, and that was satisfaction enough for the present.

At last he paused in front of the side-show tent.

Here a row of huge banners pictured by word and brush the wild man, the midget, the knife-throwers, the fortune-tellers, the snake charmer, the fat woman, the living skeleton, and others who made up the collection of oddities.

In front of the side-show entrance stood a platform, known in showmen's parlance as a "bally-hoo stage," where, as promised the multitude, certain free exhibitions are given to capture the attention of the spectators.

While Nick was looking at it and wondering what it was used for, a man came up behind him and, after a covert smile at the quaintness of the boy's attire, said:

"Say, sonny, how would you like to have a job for the evening?"

CHAPTER IV.

IN WHICH OUR HERO JOINS THE CIRCUS.

Nick was a bit startled by being addressed so suddenly from behind, for he had been under the impression that he was quite alone.

He turned around quickly, and saw that the person who had spoken to him was a shrewd-looking, sandy-complexioned man of middle age, dressed in a plain suit of the pepper-an-salt variety.

"Do you want a job?" repeated the man, eying the boy keenly. "I'll give you a quarter if you'll help me sell candy, peanuts and lemonade in the tent to-night. My regular help was taken sick at Benton, our last stop, and he was sent to the hospital, so, you see, I'm short-handed."

Here was an unexpected chance to earn something that Nick felt he couldn't afford to let get by him, so he answered:

"Yes, sir."

"Good," replied the candy butcher. "Live 'round the neighborhood?"

"No, sir," answered Nick, shaking his head dolefully.

"I thought you did," said the man, in some surprise. "Might I ask where you do live?"

"Nowhere," returned Nick, with a melancholy look.

"Nowhere!" ejaculated the candy man.

Then he looked the boy over sharply.

"You look as if you'd come off some farm where they were mighty sparing of clothes. Those trousers seem to fit you too quick," he went on with a grin.

"Yes, sir. These are some of Luke Bagley's cast-off duds. Those are the only kind of clothes I've ever had since I left the poor farm."

"Who is Luke Bagley?" asked the man, curiously.

"Mr. Bagley's son. He's bigger and older than I."

"I should imagine he was. Who is Mr. Bagley—a farmer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you run away from him?"

"Yes, sir."

"What for? Thought you'd try and join the circus?" with another grin.

"No, sir. Didn't think of such a thing."

"Didn't, eh? Why are you hanging 'round the lot, then?"

"Because I just happened to come across the tents, sir."

"That was it, eh?" said the man, who had his doubts on the subject. "Are you an honest boy?"

"I hope I am, sir," replied Nick, earnestly.

"Well, you've got an honest face, at any rate; but appearances aren't to be depended on, as a general thing. At least, I've found it so. Maybe you'd like a steady job with me? I'm on the lookout for a bright, active boy, but he's got to be a hustler. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are you a hustler?"

"If you mean can I work hard, I'll say yes. I haven't done anything else for the last four years, except on Sundays and in the winter, when I went to school."

The candy butcher, whose name was Hiram Hanks, was rather favorably impressed by Nick's talk and manner, and he concluded to give the boy a trial.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said. "I'll take you on to-night, as I've got to have a boy right away. If I find you do all right I'll hire you steady at one dollar and a half per week and your board. You'll travel with the show free, of course."

"All right, sir."

"Any chance of your late master turning up here to-night and making things unpleasant?" with a keen look.

"He won't spend fifty cents visiting a circus. I heard him say so to-day."

"Say, what was the reason you left him, anyway?"

"The principal reason was that he intended to beat the life out of me with a rawhide."

"What for? Been up to some monkey-shines?"

"No, sir," and then Nick related the events of the afternoon to his new employer.

The boy spoke with such sincerity that Mr. Hanks was persuaded to believe him.

"You were lucky to escape with a whole skin, my lad."

"Just what I think, sir. I meant to try and get a job in Brentville here, but I'd just as soon go with a circus as not. I'd like to see something of the world."

"Well, it's getting late. The people are beginning to come around, so it's time we got busy. By the way, I forgot to ask your name."

"Nick Long."

"My name is Hanks. My side-partner, who 'tends the outside booth, is Andy Tooker. Now come on—I'll introduce you to him."

"Do you suppose I could get something to eat before I started in?"

"Haven't had your supper, then?"

"No, sir. I wouldn't care if I'd had a good dinner. But the Bagleys don't spread much of a table, and half the time Luke got away with part of my share before I reached the kitchen. Then I walked six miles or more this afternoon."

"There isn't any chance of your getting supper now, Nick. However, I'll see if I can get you a couple of sandwiches. That'll do for the present, won't it?"

"Yes, sir."

So Nick was escorted to the outside booth and introduced to Mr. Hanks' partner, Andy Tooker, a young man of about twenty-five, who had all the ear-marks of a born hustler, and was dressed in a rather loud suit of clothes, with a large imitation diamond in his broad-striped shirt-front.

Darkness was now beginning to blot out the lingering twilight, and swift shadows moved across the big tent and hung about the lot.

A light breeze, long desired and grateful, began to ruffle the folds of the flags and streamers.

Then attendants went around planting the naphtha torches in position, and the advance guard of the evening crowd made their appearance in the vicinity.

The men in the ticket wagon lifted up its end and got ready for the night's work.

When the doors of the big tent opened and the people began to crowd in, Andy Tooker, who had been keeping Nick well employed on the outside, told the boy that it was time for him to go into the tent and help his partner.

Nick found that his chief duty was to perambulate the seats, first with boxes of candy, then bags of peanuts, and finally with a tray filled with glasses of a rose-colored liquor supposed to be lemonade.

Each time he made his round he carried a different article, beginning with candy again as soon as he had exhausted the immediate demand for lemonade.

At the start he found it a hard job to open his mouth to advertise his wares.

He imagined everybody was looking at him, and he was alarmed lest some of the people who lived in Salem and that vicinity would recognize him, and consequently report his occupation and whereabouts to Mr. Bagley.

It happened, however, that the Salem people had patronized the afternoon show, and so Nick escaped discovery.

As this was what is called a wagon show, the active preparations that mark the departure from town of the big modern three-ring circus did not begin in this case with, or before, the opening of the evening performance.

A short time, however, after the performance had begun the canvasmen began to get busy.

The ropes and stakes holding in position the menagerie tent were loosened, and the doorkeeper moved to the open fly of the big tent.

Then cages were closed, horses hitched, side walls lowered, and the caravan passed out into the night to take up their position at a distance until the entire show was subsequently ready to move on to the next destination.

The order, "Lower away!" rang out sharply, and the menagerie tent dropped to the ground.

The denuded center poles followed it, and the outfit was loaded upon its proper wagon and sent ahead to join the first section.

Only the noisy "big top," glowing like a mammoth mushroom, and the side-show canvas, where the band thumps and the "barker" roars with tireless energy, remained to mark the spot.

The work of stripping the larger tent continued throughout the performance.

As fast as a performer finished his act his appliance was deftly conveyed to a waiting wagon.

The entire arena was divested of its maze of apparatus before the audience had filed outside after the show.

The side-show orator received the outgoing throng with renewed clamoring.

To take this last advantage, and let no chance for profit escape, the tent had been kept open.

The freaks yawn with weariness and monotony of it all and eagerly await their last call to the front.

Then begins a dash for the freedom and privacy denied them since morning.

In the big tent the concert band is working away, while a serio-comic artist in skirts is trying to raise her voice above the noise of falling wood, as the unoccupied rows of seats are being taken apart.

The side walls peel off as the last spectator emerges and the performers hurry from their dressing-room.

Then the thin white cloth room comes tumbling from aloft like a monster bird, and the circus in Brentville was over for that season.

CHAPTER V.

IN WHICH THE CIRCUS ENTERS SIDNEY.

When the performance was nearly over, Nick had to help the candy butchers in packing up, and by the time the last spectator had left the big tent the stock in trade of Hanks and Tooker was ready for removal, and then Nick was told that his time was his own until he should be called upon next morning to begin a fresh day's labor.

"Hold on, Nick," cried Andy Tooker, as the boy was sauntering away to watch the taking down of the "big top." "You're hungry, I guess; aren't you?"

"Well, some," replied the lad, in a tone which left little room for doubt but that he was in shape to masticate a small-sized elephant if nicely cooked.

"Come with me, then."

The light and airy Mr. Tooker guided Nick to a small booth, where a number of the performers, and such other employers as were now at liberty, were partaking of a light repast of sandwiches and milk, provided by the proprietor of the show each night after the performance.

"Help yourself to whatever you see," said the candy

butcher, "and don't stand on ceremony. You're welcome to eat all you can put under your jacket."

Nick was too ravenous to require a second invitation, but sailed in, sampling ham, tongue and chicken in succession, and putting down two big glasses of milk before he paused to take a breathing spell.

"Who's this you've got in tow, Tooker?" asked one of the acrobats, who was standing back with a glass of milk in one hand and a sandwich in the other.

"New boy," replied the candy man. "He's taken Smith's place."

"Oh, I see. Looks like a bright fellow, but, Lord! where did he get the clothes? They fit him about as well as Lew Dockstader's stage dress suit does the minstrel."

"He's been working on a farm in the neighborhood and getting the short end of everything. He ran away to-day. My partner came across him on the lot about sundown, and as we needed a boy badly, why, we hired him."

"Where do I sleep to-night, Mr. Tooker?" asked Nick, after they left the eating booth.

"In our wagon," replied the candy man. "Come with me, and I'll point it out to you."

All through the night the procession of wagons, with their paraphernalia and slumbering occupants, lumbered along the county road, and finally came to rest in a long line, drawn up by the side of the road, within a couple of miles of the next big town at which the circus was billed to show that day and evening.

Nick being accustomed to turning out of bed at sunrise, he mechanically awoke about that time, and was a bit surprised to find that the vehicle was at rest.

His companions, the two candy butchers and several canvasmen, were sleeping peacefully about him.

At first he was a bit dazed by his new surroundings, and wondered if he wasn't dreaming.

But gradually the events of the previous day and night unrolled themselves before his mind, and he soon realized that he had actually embarked upon a new career in life—an attache of the biggest wagon show in the United States.

He lay a little while speculating upon what the future had in store for him, and then, growing weary of the confinement of the closed wagon, he picked his way over the other sleepers to the partly open door and jumped down into the road.

It was a lovely cool morning and Nick felt like a top.

"No potatoes to hoe to-day in the broiling sun, and then feed my stomach with anticipations as to whether Luke will have enough without making inroads on my share of the provender," cried Nick, with a cheerful grin. "Mr. Tooker says we eat at the hotels, and that, if I'm on hand early when the grub is ready, I needn't expect to go shy of enough to fill my breadpan right along. Gee! It's a satisfaction to work when you're getting enough to eat."

Nick glanced ahead along the line of waiting wagons, the horses standing with their heads down under the blankets and the drivers curled up asleep on the roofs.

"I wonder if we're near a town?" thought the boy.

He mounted the wheels of the forward wagon and saw

in the distance the houses and some of the big buildings of Sidney, with the rays of the early sun flashing upon windows and roofs.

There was a small rivulet not far away, and thither Nick went to wash his face.

"I wish I had some decent clothes," he thought. "I look like a guy in these. I'll have to work some time before I can get together enough to buy me a suit."

One of the younger performers connected with the show—a noted bareback rider—came up at this moment.

"Hello!" said the newcomer, looking Nick over critically, "where did you spring from? Work on a farm, I s'pose?"

"Not now," replied Nick, wiping his face in his not over-clean pocket-handkerchief. "I belong to the circus."

"You do?" replied the other, incredulously. "I don't remember seeing you before."

"Only joined last night."

"What are you doing? You're not a new freak in the 'kid show' (side-show), are you?" with a grin.

"No," replied Nick, shaking his head good-naturedly. "I suppose I look like a curiosity, as if I'd come out of Noah's Ark. I'm working for Hanks & Tooker, candy, peanuts and lemonade."

"Oh, I see. Fallen into Smith's shoes. Well, I wish you luck. I must say you've got pretty decent bosses, considering how they run."

"They've treated me all right so far."

"You ought to have worked for some of the chaps I've known; then you'd be able to appreciate the snap you've got."

"What was the matter with the chaps you knew?"

"Oh, they were dead hard on their boys. Never satisfied with what they did. Roasted them right along till they got tired of the life and ran away."

"A kind of Mr. Bagley, I guess," replied Nick.

"Mr. Bagley! Who's he?"

"The farmer I worked for the last four years. He didn't do a thing but work me from daylight to dark. I never could do enough to satisfy him, so he scolded me right along, and when he wasn't feeling just right he'd vary the performance by giving me a licking. I got sick of it at last and ran away from him for good."

"That's how you came to hire out to the candy butchers?"

"Yes. Is that what you call them?"

"That's the name in the business."

"I thought all butchers sold meat," said Nick, innocently.

"Well, you've got another think coming, so don't be a yap. What's your name?"

"Nick Long. What's yours?"

"Allan Ramsay. 'I'm a 'kinker.'"

"What are you?" asked Nick, to whom circus phraseology was like so much Greek.

"I'm a performer—a bareback rider. Performers are called 'kinkers.'"

"Oh!" ejaculated Nick, much enlightened. "And what am I called?"

"Your bosses will do all the calling that's necessary if you don't toe the mark," grinned Ramsay.

"Say, tell me why we're waiting out here on the road a mile or two from town," asked Nick, eagerly.

"We stay here until time to make the grand entree into the town. Then every man, horse and wagon will be decked out in the most gorgeous array. The band wagon will take the lead, and the parade will be on."

Ramsay took his leave, telling his new acquaintance he'd see him later.

When Nick returned to the road again he found everything changed.

From one end of the long wagon train to the other was life and motion.

Men were hurrying to and fro, while orders were being shouted in stentorian tones and rapidly executed.

Troops of horses were being groomed and attended to.

The road was littered with saddles, flags and general decorations.

The gilded chariots were covered with mud-bespattered canvas, which was presently to be removed.

The tired horses had not yet changed their old and dirty harness for the gaudy trappings they were to display in the parade.

The elephants and camels looked dingy, dirty and far from attractive.

How different everything looked at this hour to what it would a couple of hours later.

A "snack-stand," where a hasty bite of food and a cup of steaming coffee could be obtained by all hands, was being put into working shape.

When Nick returned to the vicinity of the wagon where he had slept he found Mr. Tooker looking for him.

"Where have you been, young man?" asked the junior boss, sharply.

Nick hastened to explain.

"Well, you want to keep closer to business after this. There's lots for you to do. There's glasses, spoons, knives and other utensils for you to scrub. Take that bucket and fill it at the spring. You'll find soap and towels in one of our boxes. Step lively now. When you get things ship-shape you can go down to that stand and get a sandwich and a cup of coffee. That'll have to do you till you get your dinner at the hotel."

Nick didn't need to be told twice to get busy, and the way he went at his work met the unqualified approval of his two bosses.

However, they didn't think it necessary to express to him their satisfaction.

They didn't consider that good policy.

"He's a smart boy," remarked Hanks to his partner. "I hope we'll be able to keep him."

"I don't think you need worry," replied Tooker. "Just leave him to me, and I guess he'll stick all right."

Some time before the procession was ready to start, Nick had finished his work and was industriously getting on the

outside of a huge meat sandwich and a cup of smoking coffee.

The acrobat who had noticed him the night before at the "snack-stand" spoke to him when he saw him at the eating booth, and introduced him to a couple of other performers who came up to sample the morning fare.

Later on he was introduced to the clown, who in turn made him acquainted with his wife and daughter.

The former was the "mother" of the show, while the latter, a pretty girl of twenty, was one of the star bareback riders, who did all kinds of stunts over banners and through tissue-covered hoops.

At last everything was in readiness, and the procession, all gaudy with banners, streamers and flags, with the band playing fortissimo, entered the streets of Sidney.

The parade was preceded by the general manager on horseback.

He had already been over the route once, noting its conditions born of long experience.

Sometimes his foresight bids him change the route, for at some points the road may be too rough, or a bridge may not look strong enough to bear an elephant, or perhaps the advance man did not appreciate that at a certain point the parade would "double" on itself.

Through densely crowded streets the procession measured its gaudy passage.

By the side of the band wagon a cloud of small boys kept tireless pace all the way to the lot.

The clown, disguised as a countryman, in a dilapidated wagon behind a wretched-looking horse, became involved in all kinds of plights that served to raise a laugh.

But long before the procession reached the lot, Nick was there helping to get the candy and peanut stands in shape, while the canvasmen were raising the tents into position.

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH OUR HERO TAKES HIS FIRST LESSON IN HORSEMANSHIP.

Nick had to cut up lemons and assist in the compounding of that mysterious decoction called circus lemonade.

He was called on to help lay out the various wares dispensed by Hanks & Tooker in the booth in the big tent and also in the booth on the outside.

In the meantime the parade reached the lot, and soon the performers were resuming their every-day attire, in readiness to go to the hotel for dinner.

Nick accompanied the first lot of them, and secured a place at the table with Allan Ramsay and several other performers, to whom he was introduced.

There wasn't much on the bill of fare he let escape him, and when he rose from the table he declared he felt as full as a tick.

"What kind of a tick?" laughed Ramsay. "A bed-tick?"

"Or a watch-tick?" snickered another.

"No," replied Nick, innocently. "I mean the insect you catch off the bushes, which screws its head into your flesh and sucks your blood."

"A sort of bucholic bedbug, you mean," grinned a trapeze artist.

"A bucholic bedbug is good," chuckled Ramsay.

Then the whole bunch left the table and returned to the lot.

In a short time the big tent began to fill up for the afternoon performance, and the indications showed that the seating capacity would be taxed to its limit.

Here's where the systematic thoroughness of the circus-usher came into play in seating the big audience, for it was his business to see that no spectator took up more room than he was entitled to.

Nick's experience that afternoon was very similar to what it had been during the previous evening, and he was kept on the run until the performance was over, shortly before five o'clock.

And so, for some weeks after that, there was scarcely any variation in the life led by Nick Long.

Andy Tooker bought him a cheap but substantial suit of clothes during his first week and took the price out of his wages.

Nick's engaging manners and wonderful good-nature, added to his good looks, soon made him a favorite among the performers, and eventually attracted the attention of the equestrian director.

That gentleman looked him over critically, and finally asked him how he'd like to learn to ride a horse, with the ultimate purpose of becoming a bareback rider.

"I don't believe I'd be able to learn, sir," replied Nick, doubtfully.

"Nonsense!" answered the director. "You'd learn fast enough under a competent instructor. It's my opinion you're cut out for the business. You're only wasting your time peddling lemonade and candy around the 'big top.' What does Mr. Hanks pay you?"

"One dollar and a half a week."

"A paltry stipend," sniffed the equestrian director, "that any boy can earn after a day's practice. As a rider you will have a far easier time of it during the show season, and you will be able to command a salary of from twenty-five dollars upward, according to the skill you display in your act. Think it over, Master Long, and let me know in a day or two."

"But who will teach me?" faltered Nick. "I haven't any money to pay for instruction, sir."

"Don't let that worry you, young man. Allan Ramsay told me he'd take you in hand and make you as good as himself. It won't cost you a nickel."

"Will Allan Ramsay really try to teach me how to ride like he does?" exclaimed Nick, for he and Allen had got to be great friends.

"Certainly he will, and take great pleasure in doing so."

"It's very kind of Allan," replied Nick, with a feeling of gratitude toward his new friend.

Yes, it was very kind of Allan Ramsay, of course.

It would take a great deal of his time and patience to initiate Nick into the skilful line of business he himself followed for a living.

But Ramsay had figured the matter all out, and saw an excellent chance for a fine rake-off to come his way.

He proposed to make an agreement with Nick that would greatly redound to his own benefit when his young friend attained a proficiency which would enable him to go into the ring, and consequently upon the regular payroll.

Ramsay had a great business head, and, being a favorite with the equestrian director, had talked the matter up with him and gained his consent to the arrangement.

He proposed to begin operations at once and carry them on through at the winter quarters of the circus, so that when the show took the road again in the spring Nick Long should be a finished performer, if it was possible to make him one; and, having sized up Nick's capabilities, he was satisfied he was making no mistake.

"You've got it in you, Nick," he said, encouragingly, when he met the boy that night after the show at the snack-stand. "All you need is for some one to bring it out, and I'm the lad for that. I'll make a star of you before next spring."

"Do you really think so?" asked Nick, anxiously.

"Do I? Well, say, leave it to me. You don't suppose it would pay me to waste time on you if I wasn't cock-sure you'd pan out, do you?" with apparent enthusiasm.

"I shouldn't think so, Allan," replied the boy, his heart going thump, thump at the very idea of qualifying himself for the ring.

"Of course not," replied Ramsay, decidedly. "Mark my words, you're a comer."

"I don't like the idea of having you go to all the trouble of teaching me for nothing, Allan. If you'll be satisfied to let me make it all right when I'm able to earn something as a rider, why——"

"We'll talk about that some other time," said Ramsay, hastily, secretly delighted to see that the boy was playing into his hands. "It was my idea to help you along in the business, but, of course, if you insist on paying me something——"

"I do," replied Nick, earnestly. "And I'm very grateful to you for the offer."

"Don't mention it, my boy. I've taken a fancy to you, and when I chum in with a fellow I'm willing to do most anything I can for him."

"I thank you very much, Allan."

"All right. We'll let it go at that. When will you be ready to begin?"

"I'll have to speak to Mr. Hanks and Mr. Tooker about it," said Nick, with some doubts as to how his employers would look upon the subject, which would compel them to lose the use of his valuable services for an hour each day.

"Oh, bother Hanks and Tooker," replied Ramsay, with a snap of his finger. "Who cares for them? I've only to speak to the equestrian director to make it all right."

"But I wouldn't like to displease them," objected Nick.

"They've treated me pretty decent since I've been with them."

"Of course they have. Why shouldn't they? You're the best boy they ever had. It's like throwing pearls before swine for you to be wasting your time carrying candy, peanuts and lemonade around among the multitude for a case and a half per."

"Well, I don't suppose I'll inconvenience them much, as I won't be able to go into the ring this season, will I?"

"No; I suppose not," admitted Ramsay.

"I'll tell Mr. Hanks to-morrow that you're going to teach me how to ride, and if he kicks up a fuss perhaps you'll speak to him yourself?"

"Sure I will, or Mr. Dickson, the director, will. They're not going to stand in your light, Nick—not if I know it," and he patted the boy encouragingly on the back.

Nick went to sleep that night with golden visions of the future dancing through his head.

Next day he interviewed Mr. Hanks on the subject, and the candy butcher didn't like the plan worth a cent, for he and Mr. Tooker had already planned to keep Nick with them all winter down South, where they proposed continuing operations.

Messrs. Hanks & Tooker thought they knew when they had a good thing, and it was their intention to nurse it for all it was worth.

However, their desires in the matter did not prevail.

The equestrian director curtly told the candy butchers that Nick Long would be taught to ride by Allan Ramsay, and that was all there was to it.

So that day, during the interval between dinner and the opening of the tent for the afternoon show, Nick received his first lesson in horsemanship.

He accompanied Allan Ramsay into the ring, and a moment afterward an attendant led in a horse, with a broad wooden saddle.

Then Nick noticed a curious piece of apparatus attached to the center pole of the tent.

He had never seen it before, and its presence excited his curiosity.

"What's that?" he asked Ramsay, pointing at the wooden projection, which resembled nothing so much as a movable gallows.

"That's the 'mechanique,'" he replied. "It is largely used by circus riders when training or learning new feats."

It consisted of a belt which went around the waist of the performer, to which was attached a long, elastic rope, which was again fastened to a wooden, gibbet-like arm.

"With that belt around you, you cannot possibly fall beyond the length of the rope, and no matter how many times you lose your footing on the pad, you cannot by any possibility come to physical grief," explained Ramsay. "That ought to inspire you with confidence at the start off."

Nick thought it would, and was exceedingly well pleased to have such protection against the tumbles his early awkwardness would bring about.

The use of this machine is objected to by some performers as reducing the nerve training to a minimum.

It is, however, in great favor by all whose nerves are already steadied by experience and who are trying new tricks.

In the case of women and children the "mecanique" is very frequently employed.

"Now, take off your shoes, coat and vest," said Ramsay. Nick obeyed.

The horse was led up, and Nick sprang upon the pad without any assistance from his instructor.

Ramsay nodded approvingly.

"Now," said the bareback rider, as he pulled down the belt which hung from the rope and fastened it around Nick's waist, "stand up and try to hold your balance. Remember, you can't fall."

Nick rose to his feet, and the sensation as the animal moved off at a walk around the sawdust ring was the most curious he had ever experienced in his life.

As he had a long bridle to aid him in keeping his footing, he had no difficulty in maintaining his footing during the first circuit.

"How does it feel?" asked his friend, with a grin.

"Kind of funny," replied the boy.

"Now we'll go a little faster. Look out! Try your best to hold yourself upright."

Ramsay cracked the long whip he carried, and the horse broke into a gentle canter.

The result was as Ramsay expected. Nick almost immediately lost his balance, the horse passed on from under him, and he was left dangling at the end of the rope like a mechanical spider at the end of a long rubber band.

Ramsay grinned as his pupil made swimming motions in the air.

Presently the horse came around again, and was stopped long enough for Nick to recover his footing on the broad saddle.

The boy thought he never would be able to learn the difficult knack of standing on a horse's back, but before the lesson was over he managed to hold his own for one complete lap at a straight canter.

"First-rate," remarked Ramsay, approvingly. "That will do for to-day. We'll try again to-morrow."

The horse was led from the ring and Nick returned to his regular duty.

CHAPTER VII.

IN WHICH OUR HERO MAKES HIS DEBUT AS THE DASHING METEOR OF THE RING.

For three lessons only was the "mecanique" used to keep Nick from falling, and then Ramsay decided the boy was able to go it alone.

During the progress of the fourth lesson Nick frequently lost his balance and fell to the sawdust; but in no instance was he hurt, and, on the whole, he seemed to acquire additional confidence through the absence of the safety device.

Mr. Dickson, the equestrian director, occasionally came into the ring to watch the progress made by the boy, and one day he was accompanied by the proprietor of the show.

Both of these gentlemen began to show considerable interest in Nick's instruction from that time on.

The young tyro was doing much better even than had been expected of him in so short a time.

He took to the line of business like a duck does to water.

He was eager to learn, and profited by the good advice handed out to him by Ramsay.

There wasn't a moment during his practice hour that he wasn't doing his level best to master the art of trick riding.

He no longer had the slightest difficulty in standing erect while his horse circled the ring at his fastest pace.

Of course, he hadn't yet learned to dispense with the saddle.

It would take many weeks of assiduous practice before he could hope to maintain his balance on the bare, rosined back of a circus animal.

"You're doing fine," remarked Dickson, at the end of the third week. "You'll soon be able to make your debut before the public."

"What does he mean by that?" asked Nick, nervously, of Ramsay, during a five-minute breathing spell.

"Oh, he's got an idea in his head," replied Ramsay, carelessly.

"He can't think of having me appear in the ring!" cried the boy, aghast.

"Don't worry. He won't ask that of you till you can do credit to your instructor," answered the performer, in an off-hand way.

"I should hope not," replied Nick, feeling much relieved, for the prospect of a public appearance in the immediate future dismayed him not a little.

Just the same the equestrian director was figuring on that very thing.

He and the proprietor had put their heads together, and this was the result of the conference.

One of the features of the show was an equestrian act performed by Miss Bessie Abbott, daughter of the lion tamer, George Abbott.

Bessie was twelve years of age, and was billed as M^{lle} Celestine, from the Cirque Oriental, Paris.

Her father was featured as Signor Alto, and he did a series of remarkable stunts with his man-eating Nubian lion, Rajah.

The equestrian director and the owner of the circus decided to introduce a new act, doubling Nick and Bessie in a high-sounding equestrian sensation, the details of which Mr. Dickson was evolving from his fertile brain.

He had spoken to Ramsay about it, and Nick's instructor had fallen right in with the idea, for it ensured him a financial revenue from the boy's talents at an earlier date than he had expected.

Consequently he was more assiduous in rounding the bright boy into shape.

Nick had already met Bessie, and the two had become great friends, though they saw very little of each other.

Bessie was now encouraged to come into the ring when Nick was practicing, and she gave him many suggestions that were far more valuable and quicker to be acted upon than those given by Ramsay himself.

Nick had been provided with trunks and a suit of fleshings to practice in similar to those worn by the regular performers in the ring.

One morning, when Nick was about half through his exercises, a second horse, equipped with a pad, was led into the arena, and almost immediately after, Bessie, in her regulation ring costume—tights, fluffy short skirts and a spangled bodice—came dancing in with the equestrian director, much to the boy's surprise.

"Now," said Dickson, in a business-like way, taking the whip from Ramsay, "I'm going to see what you two can do together."

He hoisted Bessie onto her pad, where she sat demurely, while the director began to explain the first part of the act he had in his mind.

"Now, then, get busy," said Dickson, sharply.

He cracked the whip and the two horses cantered off side by side around the ring.

Bessie sprang gracefully to her feet, with her little ribbon-decked whip in her hand.

"Good gracious, Bessie!" exclaimed Nick, the perspiration gathering on his forehead. "What is Mr. Dickson up to? I won't be able to do a thing. I'm rattled completely."

A little silvery laugh floated from the girl's lips.

"Brace up, Nick!" she said, casting a saucy, roguish look upon him. "Just watch me and do as I do."

"But I can't," blurted the boy. "You're one of the stars, and I'm only——"

"Come now, you two; what are you wasting time for?" shouted Dickson. "Get a move on."

"Put your hand on my shoulder, Nick," the little lady said, sweetly. "Now follow me," and she raised one of her limbs and pointed it outward at an angle.

Nick imitated her.

Then she leaned forward, pushing her foot out behind.

Nick followed suit, and for an instant it looked as if he were going to take a tumble; but he didn't for his arm on her shoulder steadied him.

All things considered, Nick did very well at this first rehearsal, and was quite delighted to practice with the graceful little equestrienne.

"Well," laughed Ramsay, as he accompanied the boy back to the dressing-room, "how does the idea of making your professional debut with Bessie Abbott strike you?"

"What!" ejaculated the boy, staring at him in amazement. "You don't mean to say that's what Mr. Dickson is up to, do you?"

"You've guessed it. You've made such progress since I took hold of you that the 'main squeeze' has decided to bring you before the season ends in a brother and sister act, which ought to be effective, as Bessie is one of the best riders in the business. You're in great luck, my boy. Your salary will be raised, and you'll cut out lemonade and candy selling after that."

"Do you think I'll be able to make good?" he asked his teacher, anxiously.

"Do I? Well, I guess yes," replied Ramsay, confidently.

"And shall we practice together—Bessie and I—after this?"

Ramsay nodded.

"That's the opening of your act you were doing to-day. You will go all over it again to-morrow, with such additions as Dickson tells you."

Next day, during the first half hour, Nick was taught to jump through a naked hoop, and finally wound up with a leap through the regulation tissue one.

Then Bessie came on and they practiced together.

A week passed away, and then one morning Dickson stopped Nick as he was about to leave the ring, after Bessie and he had gone entirely through their act without a hitch.

"You and Bessie will appear together in public in Lexington, where we show next Monday," he said, brusquely. "Your costume will be here by Saturday, on the night of which you will sever your connection with Hanks & Tooker. Your salary will be paid to Allan Ramsay, your instructor, for the balance of the season, and whatever money you may require he will give you. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," replied Nick, cheerfully.

"That's all," answered the equestrian director, walking off.

The circus entered Lexington, Ky., during the early hours of Sunday morning and proceeded directly to the lot.

Soon after sunrise the big top and other tents were erected, and at eight o'clock the performers went to the hotel to breakfast.

The Sabbath was a day of rest for all hands.

After dinner Bessie and Nick took a walk together through the city.

Almost the first thing the boy noticed was a long stand of circus bills, and prominently among them was a new one printed in two colors, as follows:

MADEMOISELLE CELESTINE,
The Youngest and Most Daring Equestrienne in the
World,
From the Cirque Oriental, Paris,
and
HECTOR DE VRONDE,
The Dashing Meteor of the Ring,
From the Cirque Imperielle, Paris,
In Their Marvelous, Thrilling and Soul-Stirring Act,
Entitled

THE FLIGHT OF VENUS AND ADONIS.

A Fearless, Fearful, Fascinating Feat.

Never before has the satiated public seen a spectacle to so surely stir their sluggish blood, arouse their admiration, excite their enthusiasm and command their applause.

"Look at that, Bessie," cried Nick, devouring the contents of the three-sheet bill, the product of the press agent's exuberant fancy, with distended eyes.

"I see it," replied the pretty golden-haired miss, with a rippling laugh. "Isn't it just lovely?"

"But Hector de Vronde! I don't understand——"

"Why, that's you, you goose!" she cried, with a roguish smile.

"Me!" gasped Nick.

"Of course."

"Why, my name is Nick Long, and I never came from the Cirque Imperielle, Paris."

"You silly boy! That's your professional name now."

"Oh! That's it. But read what it says: 'In their Marvelous, Thrilling and Soul-Stirring Act.' What do you think of that?"

"It's just splendid," she replied, enthusiastically.

"A Fearless, Fearful, Fascinating Feat," went on Nick. "Oh, Bessie!"

"Well, isn't it? Don't you hold me aloft by the waist while you stand on both horses as we make the final round of the ring, I with one foot on your hip and the other pointing behind, with my hands outstretched, the horses going at their highest speed and the band playing like mad? Won't that stir their blood?"

"Yes, I guess it will," admitted Nick, his blood quickening in his veins as he listened to her description.

Monday afternoon came and an immense crowd was present, for it was a beautiful October day.

At three o'clock Nick came from the men's dressing-room attired in blue trunks and pink fleshings, with a fancy whip in his hand.

He was presently joined by Bessie, in all the glory of a brand-new spangled costume, that made her look, in Nick's eyes, like a lovely little fairy.

Ramsay was on hand to give the boy a word of advice and encouragement.

The horses were all ready, and they stood champing their bits and pawing the earth in their impatience until the silver bells with which they were decorated rang out little shivering chimes that set Nick's blood in a mad whirl.

"That's your cue, said Ramsay, suddenly, as the band blared up.

The horses were led on while Dickson was introducing them much after the style of the poster.

After they sprang upon the animals the clown had something funny to say, when the director cracked his whip and they were off.

After executing the first half of their act they came to a rest again when the music suddenly ceased.

Then the clown chipped in again.

"Well," he began, addressing the ringmaster, "you stop, the horse stops, the music stops, I stop; but there's one thing that nobody can stop."

"What is the one thing nobody can stop?" inquired the ringmaster.

"Why, a woman's tongue!"*

The ringmaster, in apparent retaliatory discomfiture,

cracked his whip at the legs of the clown, who uttered "Ouch!" as if in pain, and the crowd laughed.

"What can I do for you, mademoiselle?" asked the ringmaster, politely.

Bessie made her request, the article was handed to her by the clown, then the band started up and they were off once more.

In an instant the great audience seemed to vanish from before Nick as the horses increased their speed to a mad pace under the cracking of the ringmaster's whip and the increasing fortissimo and speed of the band.

"Hoopla!" cried Bessie, excitedly, as the act drew near to its exciting termination.

Nick straddled the two whirling horses—a foot on each one—and seized her tightly by the waistband.

Then she raised one foot to the boy's hip and sprang into the air, bending forward in the attitude of a flying Mercury.

Around the ring they went as fast as the excited animals could race, amid a pandemonium of noise and melody, the great audience going wild with enthusiasm.

Nick's breath came thick and fast, and his eyes blazed with a fierce excitement.

He lost all track of time and space for the moment, and Bessie had to cry "Jump!" before he realized the finish was at hand.

She dropped lightly to her horse's back, and both sprang to the sawdust as the band came to a sudden stop.

They bowed and retired amid deafening applause.

Hardly had they got inside the curtain when one of the attendants called them to return to the ring again, where they had to repeat the last part of their act.

When they made their exeunt from the ring the second time Ramsay stepped up to congratulate them on their success.

Unquestionably Nick and Bessie had made the hit of the show.

CHAPTER VIII.

IN WHICH OUR HERO PERFORMS A HEROIC DEED.

Three years have passed away since Nick Long slipped away from the Bagley farm that bright July afternoon and joined the Great Occidental Circus at Brentville.

He is now nearly eighteen years of age, tall, finely formed and handsome.

This is his third year with the Great Occidental, which has now risen to the dignity of a three-ring show and travels by rail instead of wagon, as it did of yore.

Circus day now, to the men who had invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in the Great Occidental Show, meant the culmination of long and careful and systematic preparation.

Its advance staff consisted of a general agent, a railway contractor, an executive agent, several general contracting

*This gag originated with Sam Lathrop, a noted circus clown.

agents; car No. 1, carrying fifteen persons; first regular advertising car No. 2, bearing the chief press agent, car manager and fifteen men; car No. 3, with a dozen men; car No. 4, carrying a special press agent, car manager and ten men, including "route riders" and special ticket agents; next and finally the "layer-out," who kept one day ahead of the circus.

We haven't space here to describe in detail the duties of these people—their work was legion.

We will merely say that the railroad contractor was the first man out, and that his chief duty was arranging for the transportation of the circus trains.

Car No. 1 was professionally known as the "skirmishing car."

Attached to a passenger train, and about four weeks ahead of the show, came car No. 2, whose force of men billed and lithographed for miles around.

The men on the two other cars saw to it that the work of their predecessors was followed up carefully.

The last man, the "layer-out," inspected the lot, fixed the route of the procession and performed a variety of other final duties.

The reader will therefore understand that there is a vast difference between the Great Occidental to-day and what it was when Nick Long, now widely known as Hector de Vronde, joined his fortunes to it as an humble assistant to the candy butchers.

Hiram Hanks and Andy Tooker still run the candy and other toothsome privileges, and Mr. Hanks is never tired of telling how he introduced to the circus world the famous bareback rider, Hector de Vronde, the star in his line of the present show.

Bessie Abbott, now a lovely girl verging on sixteen years, and her father, with his Nubian lion, the Rajah, are also with the Great Occidental this year, but there is scarcely another face familiar to the old wagon show.

It was the fifth day of August.

The Great Occidental Circus had arrived early that morning at Zanesville, Ohio, had given its daily parade, and the performers were in the dressing-rooms preparing for the afternoon performance.

The people attached to the show no longer patronized the hotels for their meals, for a "cook tent," one of the marvels of the modern circus, catered to their appetites right on the lot.

"As the "cook tents" were the first to be raised in the morning, so they were the first to be leveled and packed away on the cars at night.

The last meal of the day was served at five o'clock in the afternoon, and two hours later there was no perceptible trace of the improvised restaurant save the coals which glowed in the twilight.

Neither did the circus people sleep as best they might in the traveling vehicles formerly provided for that purpose.

Two sleeping cars now carried performers and business staff in the first section, known as the "baggage train," which also bore the paraphernalia necessary to the immediate wants of the encampment.

The second train carried the elephants, camels and their keepers, performing, ring and baggage horses, seat and stringer wagons, "property" wagons and all the appliances for the performers and their baggage.

The third train carried more sleeping cars and all the cages.

But to return to our story.

The "big top," which covered an immense oblong space enclosing the three rings, was rapidly filling with spectators for the afternoon show, and the performers were nearly all dressed and ready for the "grand entree," when a terrible roar, a resounding crash, followed almost immediately by a thrilling scream from a woman's lips, echoed throughout the canvas structure and startled performers and spectators alike.

Almost immediately there followed a chorus of feminine shrieks and men's voices raised in alarm, as the crowd of visitors in the menagerie tent made a wild stampede to escape from the place.

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the equestrian director, who happened at the moment to be talking to the principal clown near the curtain which opened on the ring nearest the scene of the disturbance. "What has happened?"

A number of the male performers rushed for the menagerie tent, and as the foremost of them swept the canvas covering aside a fearful sight met their gaze.

Rajah, the big Nubian lion, and one of the great attractions of the show, had broken from his cage, struck down his trainer, George Abbott (Signor Alto on the bills), and now stood above his body, glaring down at the unconscious man, while he lashed the air savagely with his ponderous tufted tail.

Against one of the wheels of the cage containing the Bengal tiger crouched the half-fainting form of Bessie Abbott.

At this thrilling moment, when it seemed that the fate of the lion's owner was surely sealed, a stalwart young athlete, in pink fleshings and dark blue trunks, appeared upon the scene.

It was Nick Long, the champion bareback rider of the Great Occidental Show.

Taking in the situation at a glance, he looked hurriedly around for a serviceable weapon to meet the situation with.

A yard away stood a tinsmith's heater, with a big soldering iron thrust among the live coals.

The boy seized the glowing iron and, boldly approaching the monarch of the forest, thrust the heated point within half an inch of his nose.

The lion sprang back with a smothered growl and seemed as if about to spring up his aggressor; but the lad, undaunted by the peril he was facing, followed up his first advantage and literally drove Rajah back to his cage.

Several attendants now rushed up with long poles armed with iron points, with which they proposed to attack the lion; but such a proceeding was no longer necessary, for Rajah seemed to have been thoroughly cowed by Nick Long's vigorous and courageous action.

The broken door of the cage was hastily repaired by a

couple of the blacksmith's assistants, the men with the poles standing ready to keep the lion off if he exhibited a tendency to interfere with the work.

In the meantime the general manager of the show had come upon the spot and was informed of all that had occurred.

He sent the equestrian director and the several ringmasters into the rings to address and reassure the public.

Then he pushed his way through the group of performers who had crowded about the unfortunate George Abbott, now coming to his senses under the combined efforts of his daughter and Nick Long.

"How is Abbott?" he asked. "Not badly hurt, I hope?"

"His right arm seems to be broken, sir," replied Nick.

"Any other injuries?"

"I don't think so."

"Have you sent for a physician?"

"Yes, sir."

"From what I hear, Long, you performed a nervy action. Your presence of mind under such startling conditions is much to be commended. If that beast had got out among the spectators, good Lord! the results would have been deplorable. I thank you in the name of the proprietors of the show, and will see that your gallant conduct is properly represented to them."

"Well, I did the best I could under the circumstances, Mr. Sheldon," replied Nick, modestly.

"My dear fellow, you couldn't very well have done better," answered the general manager, enthusiastically. "You certainly deserve a medal."

And this also was the unanimous sentiment of all present, many of whom had witnessed the affair and were eagerly spreading the story among those who had arrived later on the scene.

At this point the doctor arrived and took the injured lion trainer in hand.

He found that the man's left arm was broken near the shoulder and that he had received a severe blow on the head from the animal's paw, though the scalp showed little signs of injury.

He set the broken arm and ordered that Abbott be removed to his berth in the sleeping car.

His directions were carried out as the performers, including Bessie, his daughter, and Nick Long, to whom he owed his life, scattered to take their places in the grand entree.

CHAPTER IX.

IN WHICH OUR HERO RECEIVES A MUNIFICENT REWARD.

"Nick, you dear, good boy! How shall I ever thank you enough for saving my dear father's life?" said Bessie, tears of gratitude shining in her lovely brown eyes.

"Don't mention it, Bessie. I'm only too happy to know that I was able to do your father a service."

It wanted a few minutes of five o'clock.

The two had met on the way from their dressing-room to the eating tent.

As it happened, this was the first opportunity they had had of exchanging a word since the beginning of the afternoon performance.

"I am sure you believe I am very grateful to you, Nick," she continued, earnestly.

"I know you are, Bessie, so don't say another word about it."

"Oh, but I will," she cried, with girlish persistency.

"You always will have your own way," he laughed, looking a bit tenderly at the pretty equestrienne. "You've managed to boss me about ever since the day I made my first appearance in the ring, with you as the bright particular star."

"What nonsense!" she cried, with a little blush. "Just as if I could!"

"Oh, you do it all right," he replied, nodding his head in a contented kind of way, as if to imply that he rather relished the air of proprietorship she exercised over him. "Well, I haven't any kick coming, Bessie. You've made me what I am."

"What a ridiculous assertion, Nick! You are the champion bareback rider of the show, while I—I'm only the same Mademoiselle Celestine. Just a little bit older, you know, and consequently less interesting."

"You never can be less interesting to me, Bessie," he said, gravely and earnestly.

"Oh, Nick! You are very good to say that, but——"

She dropped her head and blushed.

"But what, little girl? There's no buts in this thing at all. I'm sure if it hadn't been for your advice and encouragement I'd never have amounted to shucks as a rider."

"You know that isn't so, Nick. If you hadn't had the thing in you I never could have helped you even a tiny, weeny bit."

"Well, there's something in that, of course; but, all the same, it was really you who made me like the business."

"I'm glad."

"Are you really, Bessie?"

"Why, of course I am."

"Are you glad your father refused the offer to go out with 'The Greatest Show on Earth'? He'd have taken you with him, of course, and then——"

"Yes. I'd rather be with the Great Occidental."

"Would you? Why?" eagerly.

"Because I've always been with it since it was a single-ring wagon show, and it's like an old friend."

"Is that the only reason?" with a shade of disappointment in his voice.

"Isn't that a good reason?" in surprise.

"Yes. It's a good reason all right. Only I thought——"

"What?"

The boy paused, as they stood just outside of the eating tent, toward which the performers were now all gravitating, and kicked his heels into the dirt, while he looked fixedly at one of the rope stakes.

"Oh, nothing. It doesn't matter. Let's go in and eat," and he started ahead.

Bessie looked at him and then laid a detaining grasp on his arm.

"Now, what were you going to say? I want to know."

There was something of the old imperious way in her manner which had always charmed the boy and made him her devoted slave.

"It wouldn't interest you," he replied, without any life in his words.

"How do you know it wouldn't?"

"I don't know. I only think so."

"Why do you think so?" she persisted.

"Oh, because——" he blurted out, and then he stopped.

"Because what? That's only a woman's reason."

"Well," he replied, desperately, "what I was going to say is: I thought perhaps the reason why you were glad your father decided to stay with the Great Occidental was because we—you and I, you know—would be together with the same show. But of course——"

"Why, you silly boy!" she answered, with heightened color. "You know I'm glad we're in the same show. I couldn't get along without you."

"Why not? We each do our own turn these days. So far as you are concerned, I don't count any more."

"Who said you didn't, Nick Long?" she asked, spirit-edly.

"I say so."

"Don't be foolish. You always count—with me."

She flashed him a look that sent his blood racing through his veins, and then she darted into the tent, for they didn't sit at the same table.

"I wonder if she meant that?" Nick asked himself, with a little thrill of joy. "Dear Bessie! I don't think I'd have the heart to work if she wasn't with us. I'm glad I was on hand to help her father to-day—he had a close call of it. Maybe——"

He didn't get any further, for a hand was laid on his shoulder at that moment and the cheery voice of a brother performer came to his ears.

"Hello, old chap. What's the matter with you? Aren't you going to eat?"

"Sure thing," he replied, as he recognized one of the star acrobats. "Let's go inside."

After the evening meal the performers had a couple of hours to themselves.

Bessie decided to utilize the time by visiting her father, as she was anxious to know how he was getting along.

The railroad yard was not a great distance away, so when she came out of the eating tent she waited till Nick made his appearance, when she went up to him and proposed that he accompany her.

Of course he was delighted to do so.

She hurried off to get her hat, a little gypsy straw, in which the boy said she looked real cute, and together they left the lot.

They found George Abbott propped up in his bunk in the sleeper.

He was very glad to see them, as the time had hung terribly slow on his hands that afternoon.

His arm pained him a good deal, and he said his head didn't feel just right after the blow the lion had given him, but otherwise he was all right, and told them the doctor had said he would be around in a week or so, though it would be longer before he could appear, as he was advertised to do, in the Rajah's cage and put the animal through his paces.

"I shan't forget what you did for me, my lad," he said, earnestly, to Nick. "One of the men told me how you drove the lion off me and back into his cage with a hot soldering iron. It was a daring thing for you to do. It's a wonder Rajah stood for it. In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred he'd have laid you out like a pancake and chewed you up."

Bessie shuddered and laid her hand upon Nick's arm as her father spoke.

Not until this moment had she realized the full extent of the peril which the brave boy had faced.

She recalled now the innate ferocity of the Nubian beast, which long captivity had scarcely subdued.

Her father was the only one the animal seemed to fear, and there had been times when the beast, in a moment of sullen anger, had turned even upon him, and for minutes his life had trembled in the balance.

"Well, Mr. Abbott," replied Nick, cheerfully. "I suppose he was more or less dazed at finding himself outside of his cage, and, as I took him quick, before he had recovered himself, I guess that's why I came off first best."

"You've figured the thing out correctly. The management has cause to be truly thankful to you. You averted not only a panic among the audience, but you've saved many a human life. Great heaven! If Rajah had once tasted, aye, even smelled, human blood, nothing under heaven could have held him. His ten years of confinement would have slipped from him like a mantle, and he would have been as he was the day he was captured in the jungles of Nubia—a savage man-eater."

The Zanesville evening papers gave considerable space to the lion episode, and all praised the courage and presence of mind of the famous bareback rider, Hector de Vronde, who had in such a signal manner proved himself equal to the occasion.

The story was telegraphed all over the country by the Associated Press, and an item detailing the facts was printed in nearly every morning paper.

It also appeared in condensed form in the New York "Clipper," and as a result every circus man in the United States read and commented upon it.

We may add here that in time Abbott's arm got well and he resumed his act as usual.

Next day the show was in Freeport.

The lion incident had been judiciously advertised so as to attract public attention to the hero of the occasion, and that afternoon the immense tent was crammed to suffocation, every man, woman and child of whom awaited with

feverish interest the appearance in the ring of the great bareback rider—Hector de Vronde.

Needless to say he received an ovation second only to the one he had received the previous evening in Zanesville.

The papers, too, had something to say about him personally, and the articles bore the impress of the circus press agent's hand, for they bristled with facts that the news editor would never have secured.

That day was pay-day for the performers (on Wednesdays, during the afternoon show, the long line of workmen received their weekly wages), and they lined up before the pay wagon between the afternoon and evening performances.

When Nick was handed his envelope he was told that the general manager wanted to see him.

Wondering what the great mogul wanted with him, he presented himself before Mr. Sheldon, whom he found talking to one of the owners, who accompanied the circus in a private car attached to the rear of the last train.

"Mr. Long," said the general manager, in a genial voice, "I have sent for you to express to you the deep sense of obligation the management feel under to you for your praiseworthy action yesterday afternoon in Zanesville when the lion escaped from his cage. There is little doubt but your prompt and effective way—all the more commendable because adopted on the spur of the moment—of coming to the rescue at such a critical moment prevented a lamentable panic, which could only have resulted disastrously to the proprietors of this show. The management therefore feel that you deserve some substantial evidence of their gratitude for the service you have rendered them, so I have been instructed by Mr. Jackman here to present you with the company's check for the sum of one thousand dollars."

Thus speaking, Mr. Sheldon handed the astonished Nick Long an oblong slip of paper, which bore a lithographed picture of a circus tent and the words "Great Occidental Show" on the stub end, and represented an order on the show's bankers to pay to the lad the sum mentioned in the currency of the country.

Nick was certainly taken by surprise, for he had not expected to be rewarded for what he had done, unless it was with the smiles and grateful appreciation of pretty Bessie Abbott, which was more to him than all the money in the world.

He accepted the check, however, as such a thing as a refusal to do so would have both surprised and offended the nabobs of the show, and thanked the general manager and Mr. Jackman in a somewhat confused way.

Then the very first thing he did was to run off and show it to Bessie, who congratulated him with sparkling eyes.

CHAPTER X.

IN WHICH OUR HERO HAS AN UNEXPECTED MEETING WITH
LUKE BAGLEY.

Next day was Sunday, the circus man's day of rest and relaxation.

The start from the Saturday stand is always made the same night, and the Sabbath respite is improved for long railroad runs.

The route is so planned in advance that on no one night, except Saturday, is the journey so long that, everything favorable, there will be tardy arrival.

The usual run is eighty to ninety miles; the trips of one hundred and fifty and two hundred miles are reserved for Saturday-night.

Therefore when Nick, who was still a comparatively early riser for a professional, tumbled out of his bunk in the sleeper, he found the train still on the move, with the prospect of several more hours in the cramped quarters of the car.

Knowing from past experience that the resources of the train restaurant would be sorely taxed, for circus appetites are voracious in the morning, he had prudently laid in a supply of ruit and food the night before, and placing a chair upon the car platform, for the day was warm and sunny, he proceeded to make the best of the situation.

Nick passed a whole hour in solitary contemplation of the shifting landscape, smiling under the morning sun, before any of his companions made their appearance.

He often thought of Allan Ramsay, who had initiated him into the business, and incidentally pocketed seven-eighths of a six weeks' salary, and subsequently one-half of the following season's pay, in return for certain expenditure of time and patience at the company's winter quarters.

Nick never kicked, for the young man had practically made an artist of him.

Now Ramsay was with the "Greatest Show on Earth," and the boy at rare intervals received a letter from him.

Nick's new chum was Arthur Dale, an aerial artist, one of a trio called the "Rinaldo Family"—two men and a woman—whose "gymnic gyrations, swallow-like sweeps, swings and somersaults, altitudinous ascensions and far flights" (according to the press agent) "kept the dizzy heights of the canvas dome alive with activity."

Arthur was a clever young fellow of about Nick's own age, and the two were warm friends.

He was the second performer to turn out on this Sunday morning, and he came out on the platform as the train slowed down at a wayside station for the engine to take water.

"How long have you been up, old man?" he inquired.

"Oh, about an hour," replied Nick, carelessly.

"You're always an early bird."

"Sure thing. I was brought up to it, and I can't get it out of my bones," grinned Long.

"I hate the morning," remarked Dale. "I'm always as stiff as a piece of new leather. Let's get off—I see the train has come to a stop. I want to stretch my limbs."

"Same here," said Nick, leaping to the ground.

His companion stepped down with painful slowness.

"Funny, isn't it, we're always this way the morning after the show?" he said.

"That's right. You can always tell a performer from a

workingman by the way he gets off the car. I wonder what village that is yonder?"

"Don't ask me, Nick," answered Dale. "Better inquire of the station agent, if he's about, if you want to know real bad."

Nick hadn't any great curiosity on the subject, and, besides, the station agent was in bed asleep at that moment.

There was a big, freckle-faced boy standing on the platform, however, who was gaping with all eyes at the circus train.

His face seemed to be familiar to Nick as he drew near to him, and he looked at him narrowly, but couldn't place him.

Suddenly the boy turned and looked him squarely in the face.

His mouth opened and his protruding eyes opened wider. Like a flash Nick recognized him.

"Luke Bagley, is that you?"

"Nick Long!"

"Right you are, Luke. What are you doing out this way? How are things around Salem, eh?"

Dunno. We don't live at Salem no more."

"No?" in some surprise.

"No. Dad sold out and come here. We're keepin' a store."

"In the village yonder?"

Luke Bagley nodded.

"Say, what did you run away from us for?" he asked, in some little excitement. "And where have you been all this time?"

"I guess you know why I ran away. Your father threatened to give me the whipping of my life, tied me up to a post in the barn to make sure I shouldn't get away, and I concluded not to stand for it, so I made tracks for Brentville."

"Well, you made the mistake of your life by doin' it," replied Luke, with a grin.

"I'm afraid there's a difference of opinion between us on the subject," laughed Nick.

"That's because you don't know what you missed."

"I know what I didn't miss," smiled the circus rider.

"What's that?"

"The whipping your father had laid out for me."

"You wouldn't have got it."

"Wouldn't I?" chuckled Nick, incredulously.

"No."

"Why, if I rightly remember, you were as anxious as your father to see that I got it to the limit."

"That hain't got nothin' to do with it. We changed our minds."

"Very kind of you, indeed," replied Nick, sarcastically.

"Somethin' turned up that caused us to," went on Luke.

"Must have been very important to work such a sudden effect."

"It was," grinned the boy, wagging his head in a positive way.

"I'm afraid it can't be of any interest to me now, so we'll forget it."

"It'll interest you all right when you hear about it," said Luke, in so significant a way that Nick looked at him in surprise.

"What do you mean?"

"Come up to the store and the old man will tell you all about it."

"Sorry I can't oblige you," said Nick, "but I can't leave this train."

"This is the circus train, isn't it? The one that's billed to show in Peoria to-morrow?"

"You've got it right."

"You don't mean to say you belong to the circus, do you?" replied Luke, in great astonishment.

"Yes; I'm with the show."

"Why, what can you do?" almost scornfully.

"Oh, I can ride a little," laughed Nick.

"So can I, but that don't count much for a circus."

"Not your style of riding, I guess."

"I can ride as good as I ever seen you do," snorted Luke, indignantly.

"I'm not disputin' that," replied Nick, pleasantly.

"Then what are you talkin' about? Are you a canvasman?"

Nick shook his head.

"Maybe you're one of the chaps that drive the wagons?" curiously.

"You've got another guess coming, Luke," said Nick, in an amused tone.

"Well, what do you do, anyway?"

"Would it really interest you to know?"

"Sure it would."

"Well, then, I ride in the ring."

"The deuce you do!" opening his bulging eyes again.

"One of the fellows in the grand entree, eh?"

"Yes, I ride in the grand entree. We all do."

"Gee! Couldn't you get me a job at that?" eagerly.

"I'm sick of the store, and I'd like to make a change. How much do you get for it?"

"I'm afraid there isn't any opening at present, Luke."

"Couldn't you let me know when there is?"

"You're better off at home, Luke. Circus life isn't what it's cracked up to be."

"I'd like to go along with one for a while. Say, you'd better come along with me and see the old man. You can go to Peoria by another train."

"Couldn't think of it, Luke."

"You don't know what you're missin', Nick Long."

"Come, now, what are you driving at?"

"The old man will tell you if you go and see him."

"It's very important, I suppose," laughed Nick.

"I guess you'll find it so," nodded Luke.

"Well, as you seem to know a good deal about it, why don't you put me wise to it? The train will be going in a minute."

"You've got to see the old man. He knows all the particulars. What I could tell you wouldn't do you no good."

"T-oo-t! T-oo-t!"

Two screeches from the locomotive warned Nick and

others belonging to the train who had got off that the engineer was on the point of starting up again.

"Well, I'm off, Luke. If you people have anything important to tell me you can write me, care of the Great Occidental Show, per route: Peoria, Lincoln, Pontiac, Bloomington, Danville, Lafayette—we show in those towns next week. Good-bye."

Nick made a dash for the already moving train, which Arthur Dale had boarded, took a flying leap for the platform of the sleeper and sat down in his chair.

Luke watched the train till it rounded a curve and disappeared, then he started post haste for home to tell his father and mother that he had just met Nick Long and that he was with the Great Occidental Circus.

CHAPTER XI.

IN WHICH NICK AND BESSIE ENACT THE CHIEF CHARACTERS
IN LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

Within an hour the train arrived at Peoria, and the other sections followed in close order.

Few of the performers or staff members went to the lot for Sunday meals, although the eating tent awaited their presence.

They registered at the local hotels and spent much of their time in writing and reading.

At the lot the scene was one of peace and quiet.

The canvas of the "big" and other "tops," which had not been elevated, lay passive on the ground, ready for the men to haul them aloft at sunrise.

Nick and Bessie generally spent the day in each other's company, either at the cars or walking about town, according to weather conditions.

Nick and Arthur Dale, in company with one or two other performers, walked out to the lot, which was on the suburbs, and then took a trolley ride to a small adjacent town and back.

On their return Arthur and the others proceeded to a well-known hotel to take dinner, while Nick kept on to the railroad yard to meet Bessie and dine with her at a big restaurant a few blocks distant.

As he approached the sleepers he saw Bessie, with her hat on, leaning from the platform of her car.

Though some little distance off, he signaled to her with his hand, for he guessed she was on the lookout for him.

She answered him, jumped to the ground and started to walk toward him.

At that moment a gymnast named Jackson Parke, who had been somewhat attentive to Bessie on the sly, suddenly appeared around the corner of an empty freight car and confronted her.

Bessie didn't like Jackson Parke and tried to avoid him, but was not successful.

"Don't be so coy, Miss Abbott," said Parke, with a smirk

that was habitual with him. "You might permit me the pleasure of a few words with you."

Parke was a good-looking young fellow, and thought himself irresistible with the ladies.

"You'll have to excuse me, Mr. Parke," answered Bessie, whose manner toward him was not encouraging.

"Why, what's your hurry?" he asked, barring her progress.

"I've got an engagement," she replied, coldly.

"It will keep a little while, I guess," he said, coolly.

"Will you please let me pass?"

"Certainly, after you've honored me with your presence for a few moments," he answered, with an irritating smile.

"But I've no time to talk with you, Mr. Parke," persisted Bessie, feeling greatly provoked.

"Oh, but you can make a little time, you know. I haven't had a word with you for three days, and that isn't fair."

"If you are a gentleman, Mr. Parke, you will not detain me," cried Bessie, angrily, making another futile effort to get by.

"Why, of course I'm a gentleman," he said, twirling his small black mustache. "Come now, be reasonable, Miss Bessie. I was going to ask you to take dinner with me. Will you honor me?"

"No, sir."

She gave it to him straight from the shoulder, for she was very indignant over his conduct.

"Why not?"

"I wish you'd leave me alone, Mr. Parke. If you don't——"

"Well, if I don't, what then?" he laughed, tantalizingly.

"I'll have to appeal to Mr. Long."

"Indeed!" with a sneer. "I have no use for Mr. Long whatever."

"Thank you, Mr. Parke," said Nick, who overheard the remark as he stepped up. "It is quite mutual."

Jackson Parke swung around on his heel and faced the young equestrian, whose approach he had not heard.

"What do you mean by that?" he demanded, aggressively.

"Nothing more than you meant by your remark, Mr. Parke," replied Nick, with mock politeness.

"What do you mean by stealing up behind me in that way?" angrily.

"I wasn't aware that I stole up behind you. If you hadn't been so deeply engaged with Miss Abbott you might easily have heard my footsteps."

"I don't care to talk with you, Nick Long."

"You're not obliged to, Mr. Parke. Come, Bessie, we'll run along, if you say so."

She quickly brushed by the handsome acrobat, joined Nick, and then, without another word to Jackson Parke, they walked off up the railroad tracks.

"I'm so glad you came just when you did, Nick," she said, earnestly.

"Was Parke annoying you?"

"Yes, indeed. He wouldn't let me by."

"Why not?"

"He insisted that I should stop and speak to him."

"Oh, did he?" laughed Nick.

"Yes. And he had the cheek to ask me to go to dinner with him," cried Bessie, indignantly.

"You didn't seem to appreciate the honor very much," he grinned, cheerfully, for he was rather tickled than otherwise to see Jackson Parke taken down a peg.

"Honor! Indeed!" with a toss of her pretty head.

"Of course you couldn't accept, for you had already promised to go with me."

"Just as if I'd go with him, anyway. I don't like him one bit."

"And he's such a handsome fellow, too," with a tantalizing smile.

"Aren't you just too provoking, Nick Long!" flashing a saucy look in his face.

"Am I? Well, I've got to get back at you once in a while."

"Get back at me! What do you mean?"

"Well, you know you put it all over me every once in a while, when you happen to be in the mood. Come, now, own up."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she replied, with a pout.

"Don't you know that you tease the very life out of me sometimes?"

"Do I?"

"Yes, you do. Whenever I'm in earnest with you that's the time you roast me."

"The idea! I didn't think you were ever in earnest about anything except your work."

"Well, I'm in earnest about another thing."

"And what is it, pray?" with a sly glance in his face.

"Haven't you the least idea?"

"Why, of course not," roguishly.

"Do you want me to tell you real bad?"

"If you like."

"I have tried to tell you a dozen times, but you always sidetrack me."

"Nonsense!"

"Bessie," he said, taking the bull by the horns, "do you like me well enough to promise to be my wife some day?"

That was coming to the point with a vengeance, and the girl blushed a deep crimson and looked down on the ground.

"I want an answer, Bessie. I love the very ground you walk on, and this suspense is wearing on my nerves. Do you care for me as I want you to? Will you marry me one of these days? What is it, dear—yes or no?"

"Yes," she answered, in a low, sweet tone.

"Bessie, you've made me very, very happy."

"Have I? Then I am very, very glad."

And so it was that, in spite of the fact that if there is one thing frowned upon more than all others in tented life it is adventures of the heart, the seeds of love sowed three years before, when Nick and Bessie made their triumphal appearance in the new act, "The Flight of Venus and Adonis," sprouted gloriously in Illinois, with the prospect of a golden harvest in the near future.

CHAPTER XII.

IN WHICH LUKE BAGLEY RECEIVES THE CIRCUS' THIRD DEGREE.

Nick Long, or Hector de Vronde, as he was called in the bills, was the most brilliant and daring bareback rider in the Great Occidental Show, and under his skilful coaching Bessie Abbott, or M'lle Celestine, eclipsed all the lady riders this season.

She was now able to turn back somersaults from the broad, rosined haunch of her milk-white horse, Esmeralda.

Both she and Nick owned their own animals, which they had trained down to a fine point.

Nick's was a splendid jet black stallion, with a white star in his forehead, who answered to the name of Dandy.

It is easy to believe that Nick and Bessie were uncommonly fond of their animals.

The sharp little vibrant "clucks" with which Bessie commanded Esmeralda in the ring were "cues" which the animal understood as well as she did the swaying of the ring-master's whip from left to right or the pressure of the rider's satin slipper.

On Monday morning, after the parade was over, an attache of the circus hunted up Nick Long and told him that a very persistent young man, with sandy hair and bulging eyes, wanted to see him, and wouldn't take "no" for an answer.

Of course Nick immediately recognized this person as Luke Bagley, and it annoyed him not a little to find that Luke was following him up.

"Where is he?" he asked of the attendant.

"Outside, back of the menagerie tent."

"All right. I'll see what he wants."

Accordingly Nick strolled around to the indicated spot just as soon as he had got into his every-day clothes.

"Hello, Nick," exclaimed Luke, in a familiar tone. "I've come."

"I see you have," replied the equestrian, not over-cordially.

"I told ma and the old man that I'd seen you, and dad is comin' over to the show to-night to have a talk with you."

"He is?" cried Nick, not at all pleased at this piece of news, as he had no wish to meet Mr. Bagley, for whom he only cherished unpleasant recollections.

"Yes," replied Luke, nodding his shock head vigorously.

"I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint him," said Nick.

"I wouldn't if I was you," answered Luke, with a meaningful leer.

"It is one of the rules of the circus that none of the performers are permitted to leave the tent until the show is over."

"Then he'll wait till the show is over."

"Say, Luke, can't you tell me what your father wants to see me for?"

"Nope."

"Why not?" impatiently.

"He told me not to open my face to you," grinned Luke, who prided himself on the amount of slang he used.

"Very well, then, I won't see him."

"You'll be sorry, all right, if you don't."

"Oh, cut it out, Luke. You sang that song in several keys yesterday morning. I'm sick of hearing it," said Nick, in a tone of disgust.

"All right, Nick. It's your funeral, not mine. Now, let's talk of somethin' else."

"Well, make it short and to the point. I'm going to dinner."

"Where do you eat? At a hotel?"

"No. In a long tent on the other side of the big top."

"What do you call the big top?" asked Luke, who was unfamiliar with circus terms.

"The main tent, or auditorium, which covers the three rings."

"Oh!" ejaculated Luke, feeling much enlightened. "You call that the big top. Well, it's big enough, all right. You must occupy a ten-acre lot here."

"About that. Anything of less area would mean cramped quarters."

"Well, see here, Nick. I've come over to join this circus, and I want you to introduce me to the boss and put in a good word for me."

"Is that all you want me to do, Luke?" asked Nick, sarcastically, amazed at the nerve of his old tyrant.

"If you can do any more I shan't forget it when pay-day comes around," grinned young Bagley, condescendingly.

"Thanks. There's nothing mean about you, is there, Luke?"

"Not on your tintype, there isn't. If you'll go over to the corner grocery yonder I'll blow you off now."

This was an uncommonly generous offer on Luke's part, and quite a safe one, as the people attached to a circus are not permitted under any circumstances to indulge in stimulants.

"I thought I told you yesterday morning that we had no opening for new people," said Nick, ignoring Luke's bibulous invitation.

"I know you did, but I thought maybe you was foolin'," returned the aspirant.

"I wasn't fooling. I stated the fact."

"You have such a lot of people that one more can't make much difference to the boss. Circuses coin money, you know."

Evidently Luke Bagley was laboring under a popular misapprehension regarding the profits of the circus business.

As a matter of fact, some of the large organizations have continued in existence for periods of several years without returning a cent on the investment, or at an actual operating loss.

The daily expenses of the Great Occidental Show were placed by the management at over four thousand dollars.

When it is stated that the daily average free admissions, largely tickets given for bill-posting privileges, amounted to about one thousand, and that one-quarter of the attend-

ance comprised children under nine years of age, and who paid the half-rate, i. e., 25 cents, it will be seen that some eleven thousand persons, including those with free tickets, had to pass the door each day before a dollar's profit had been yielded from this source for the management.

The Great Occidental's "big top" capacity was eight thousand five hundred persons, or seventeen thousand for the two daily shows, and it was no uncommon thing for the net revenue to be supplied entirely by side-show, peanuts, popcorn, lemonade and other small departments.

"You seem to know all about it, Luke," replied Nick, coldly.

"Sure I do," in a confident tone. "Now, I want you to introduce me to the boss of the shebang."

Nick was on the point of curtly refusing his request, when a brilliant plan of getting rid of his persevering visitor occurred to him:

It had been worked before, and there was no reason why it wouldn't be just as effective with Luke Bagley.

"I can't introduce you to the proprietor, Luke, but I'll tell you what I'll do—I'll turn you over to the head clown and let him pass upon you."

"All right," replied the gullible Luke, quite delighted at the offer.

"Come with me," said Nick, and Luke followed him around to the other side of the big top. "Wait round here till dinner is over and I'll do what I can for you."

Luke agreed to wait, and then Nick, with a suppressed grin, went into the midday meal.

Dan Leno was the name of the head clown of the Great Occidental Show, and Nick sought him out and told him he had a very persistent applicant for a circus job on his hands, a boy who once upon a time had lorded it over him to the top of his bent, and he asked the clown if he would take his former tyrant in hand.

"Sure I will," chuckled Leno, with alacrity. "Where is he?"

"Come with me and I'll introduce you to him."

Nick easily found Luke hovering around the appointed rendezvous.

"This is Mr. Leno, our head clown, Luke. Mr. Leno, Luke Bagley."

"So you want to join the circus, do you, my lad?" asked the clown, with a twinkle in his eye.

"That's what I do," replied Luke, airily.

"Well, come with me and I'll see what's in you."

Luke was escorted with great deference to the men's dressing-room, received by the performers, most of whom had received the tip, with keen anticipatory delight, and ostentatiously welcomed to their ranks.

"You will have to begin your career as a laugh-provoker," explained Leno, "as that is the only vacancy we have at present."

Luke was tickled to death at the idea of making his debut as one of the clowns.

"Get into these," ordered Dan, producing a suit of tights.

Luke undressed and assumed the fleshings.

An old, grotesque, loose dress was handed to him, and he was requested to put it on.

His hair was filled with powdered sawdust, his face was daubed with chalk and dye-stuffs, and then Leno ordered him into the nearest ring.

There the ringmaster, prepared to do his part, awaited him.

Luke soon felt the sharp lash of the whip upon his naked legs, and was put through a course of sprouts that took all desire for a circus life out of him.

He finally left the dressing-room a sadder if not a wiser boy, and so disgusted was he that he didn't attend either the afternoon or evening show, as had been his intention.

CHAPTER XIII.

IN WHICH OUR HERO OVERHEARS A PLOT AGAINST HIS HORSE, DANDY.

A cloudy morning greeted the arrival of the Great Occidental Show in Lincoln, Ill., and the chances of a disagreeable rain before the day was over looked good.

There is nothing like a spell of rainy weather to breed a feeling of despair in a showman, but it is inevitable that sometimes rain and mud and wind be encountered.

So prepared was the Great Occidental for exigencies that nothing short of a flood would prevent unloading and the presentation of some sort of exhibition.

During the parade the sky grew darker and darker and the prospect less favorable for a big crowd; but still no rain fell, which was fortunate for the lightly clad performers, as well as for the gaudy trappings and gilded vehicles.

Everything and everybody returned to the lot without mishap; then the people began to hustle into their regular togs to go to dinner.

The clouds lowered over the landscape, a twilight air brooded upon the face of nature, and it soon began to rain.

Nick was seized with a sudden desire to enter the deserted menagerie tent and take a look at Rajah, the Nubian lion, in his ponderous cage.

He had a curiosity to see whether the beast was much affected by the change in the weather.

While standing in the shadow of an adjacent cage he heard two persons enter the tent and stop within a few feet of him.

He recognized them immediately by their voices.

One was Jackson Parke and the other the stud groom to whom he confided the care of his brilliant and intelligent stallion, Dandy.

"Now I'll talk to you, Blickett," said Jackson Parke. "There's no one here, consequently we can converse without fear of being overheard. You say Long hauled you over the coals because he caught you with a small flask of brandy in your possession?"

"Yes. And he threatened to report me to the manage-

ment if the thing occurred again, curse him!" cried Blickett, angrily.

"Well, are you going to stand for that? From a mere boy, too?" remarked Parke, in a taunting tone.

"What can I do? He's got me dead. If he reported me to the general manager my name would be Tim Flynn in no time."

"What can you do? Why, get back at him, of course."

"I would in a minute if I only knew how," grated the groom.

"Do you mean that?" asked Jackson Parke, eagerly.

"I do, so help me bob!" hissed Blickett, his features working convulsively.

"S'posing I show you a way?"

"Say, Mr. Parke, what are you tryin' to do? Draw me out, and then——"

"And then what?"

"Give me away? If I thought so, I'd——"

"Well, what would you do?" asked the acrobat, coolly.

"I'd make you curse the day you were born," glared the groom.

"Look here, Blickett, I'm not trying to do you. Why should I? On the contrary, I want to put you in the way of getting square with Nick Long."

"Why?" asked the groom, suspiciously.

"Why! 'Cause I hate the fellow as bad as you do, if not worse," cried Parke, and, judging by the tone of his voice, he meant it.

"Why do you hate him? What have you ag'in him?"

"He's cut me out with the girl I'd give a year's sal. to win."

"You mean Bessie Abbott, don't you?" grinned the groom.

"I do."

"You'll never get the inside track with her while Long's around."

"I know it. That's why I want to do him."

"How can you? If I knew of a safe way, I'd——"

"Try it, eh?"

"I would."

"Listen to me, then. I can show you a way that'll cut him to the quick."

"You can?" hoarsely.

"I can."

"And is it safe?"

"Perfectly."

"What is it?"

"My scheme is to strike him through his horse."

"Through his horse?"

"Yes. He thinks the world of the animal."

"I don't wonder. He's a dandy, both by name and education. I ought to know, for I handle him."

"That's just it. I can't reach him, but you can."

"What's your little game?"

Jackson Parke put his hand in his pocket and drew out a good-sized pill box.

Taking off the cover, he said:

"Do you see that?"

"I do. It's a bolus, isn't it?"

"Yes. I want you to put that into his mouth this afternoon just before you lead him into the ring."

"What will it do to him?"

"Ten minutes or less after taking it the horse will drop in his tracks; Nick Long will be pitched over his head, and if he escapes without a broken neck I shall be surprised. In any case the horse Dandy will be out of business for good."

"Dead!" gasped the groom.

"As a coffin nail," with a mirthless laugh. "I'll give you fifty dollars spot cash to turn the trick."

"It's too risky," breathed the groom.

"No risk at all."

"How do you make that out?"

"In case of a post-mortem examination nothing will be found to show that he was given this bolus."

"His stomach will show it, won't it?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"It dissolves almost immediately through his blood. The symptoms are heart disease."

"How can you tell that?"

"I've had proof of it."

"I wish I was sure of that."

"You've got to take my word for it, Blickett; but I swear to you what I am telling you is the truth."

The groom scratched his head and hesitated.

"If this thing should happen to go wrong you know what would happen to me," he said, nervously.

"It needn't go wrong if you've the sand to put it through right."

"I've got the sand all right. What I mean is, if by any chance the truth came out any way."

"There isn't the slightest chance," insisted Parke.

Still the groom hesitated.

It was a mighty risky thing for him to undertake.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Jackson Parke. "I hate the fellow so much that I'll raise the ante to seventy-five dollars, but you'll have to wait till Saturday for the other twenty-five dollars."

The fifty per cent. raise in the price of the bit of villainy turned the scale in the acrobat's favor.

"Give me the box. I'll chance it," said Blickett, with an evil glitter in his eye. "I hate to hurt the horse, but as there's no other way——"

"That's the only chance you have to reach Long. Whether he's hurt or not, it will queer his act for him to lose Dandy, and it will break his heart into the bargain."

"Curse him!" muttered the groom. "I'd rather see him break his neck."

"Let us hope he will," replied Jackson Parke, with a little, evil laugh. "Now I'm going into dinner. Lord, how it rains! And how dark it is, in these tents! You couldn't ask for a better day to do the job. No one will see you put that pill into Dandy's mouth."

"I hope not," retorted the groom, as they both walked out of the menagerie tent.

For a moment Nick Long, who had overheard every word of the scoundrelly deal between the acrobat and Blickett, stood as if turned into stone, so paralyzed was he at the conspiracy against him and his noble animal, Dandy.

"Good Lord!" he gasped, at last. "What a pair of villains! And to think I've always treated Blickett in a particularly friendly way, and this is the way he turns on me because I stopped him from boozing on the quiet. I knew if the general manager heard that he carried a flask in his pocket he would have been thrown out of the lot in short order, and I didn't want to lose his services, as he seems to understand Dandy and the animal likes him. But, good gracious! This is the limit! I must find Mr. Sheldon at once and lay the case before him. That scoundrel Parke certainly hit on a plan that, were it successful, would have hurt me more than anything I know of short of the loss of Bessie herself. How any man could find it in his conscience to deliberately plan the murder of an innocent horse gets me. But it looks as if some people didn't possess such a thing as a conscience."

With this reflection Nick also left the menagerie tent and went in quest of the general manager of the show.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN WHICH JACKSON PARKE RETIRES FOREVER FROM THE RING.

The weather cleared up during the dinner hour and the prospects were brighter for a good afternoon crowd.

The electric cars passing by and in the neighborhood of the lot soon began to empty themselves of a horde of passengers who had been packed inside like sardines in their box, and the stream of eager circus patrons headed for the show ground and surged around the ticket wagon like breakers beating against a big rock along shore.

This was a satisfactory condition of affairs to Mr. Sheldon, the general manager of the show, who was much in evidence in the hurry and excitement at the main entrance, but for all that a frown, not usual with him, rested on his face.

The grave responsibilities of the circus were his, and he was a man well fitted for the position, requiring peculiar natural talents, wide experience, knowledge of law and logic and familiarity with affairs in general.

The hundred and one little annoyances with which he was continually beset never outwardly disturbed him, therefore those attaches who noticed his face this afternoon were satisfied that something out of the ordinary had occurred to ruffle the feelings of the general manager.

And so there had.

Nick Long had interviewed him, and the story he told roused Mr. Sheldon's astonishment and ire as few other matters connected with the show would have done.

Although the information conveyed to him by the bright

(Continued on page 26.)

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(Continued from page 24.)

boy seemed incredible, still the general manager believed him; at any rate, he wasn't going to take any chances.

"Don't worry about Dandy," he said, as he saw the trace of tears in the boy's eyes. "I'll see that nothing happens to your horse. I'm only sorry you have no corroboratory evidence against these men. Never mind. It is my purpose to catch Blickett in the act, if possible, with the poisoned pill in his possession, and then I'll force a confession from him that will probably implicate Mr. Parke enough to cause his sudden retirement from the show."

Nick Long was dressed and almost ready for his act in the middle ring, when Arthur Dale stepped up to him and put his hand on his shoulder.

"What's troubling you, Nick?" he asked, kindly.

"Oh, nothing. What should trouble me?" he answered, with a little nervous laugh.

"Come, now, old fellow, you can't stand me off in that way. I know something is the matter with you."

"What makes you think so?"

"You show it in your face. I saw Parke looking at you a moment ago in a strange kind of way, and two or three of the people called my attention to you."

"Pshaw!" cried Nick, with an impatience that was new to him. "Cut it out. I'm all right."

"You're not all right, and you can't make me believe that you are. For heaven's sake, man! you can't afford to lose your nerve just before that act of yours. You need every ounce of it. If you're not well, you'd better see the director. Don't take any chances of a broken neck."

"Who's speaking about a broken neck?" said a voice behind them, and a sibilant laugh sounded in their ears.

Nick started as if he had received a shock from a powerful galvanic battery.

He turned squarely around and faced Jackson Parke, whose handsome countenance wore an irritating sneer.

"I was just saying——" began Dale, when Nick stopped him and, looking Parke in the face, said, hotly:

"You're an infernal scoundrel!"

"What's that?" cried the acrobat, in a rage, drawing back his clenched fist, while Dale, as well as others who were attracted by the sudden and unusual display of temper on Nick's part, looked their astonishment.

"I'll repeat the words, so there can be no mistake about them: You are an infernal scoundrel!"

"Curse you! Take that!" exclaimed Parke, furiously, making a pass at the boy's face.

But he didn't catch Nick off his guard.

The rider warded off his arm and then struck the acrobat with all his force squarely on the chin, stretching him utterly dazed upon the earth of the dressing-room.

In a moment the place was in confusion.

No one could understand the cause of the scrap.

Jackson Parke had apparently not said or done anything to provoke it.

Evidently the reason for it dated back.

"I'm afraid you're in for a big fine," said Dale, in a tone

of some concern, to his friend. "What the dickens did you go for him for?"

"The whole circus will know in ten minutes," replied Nick, with heaving breast and flashing eye. "I said he was a scoundrel, and so he is."

"Explain. What has he done to you?" asked Arthur, eagerly.

"Yes; tell us all about it," spoke up another performer, while two of the people were assisting Jackson Parke to his feet.

"You'll learn soon enough without me telling you," replied the boy, shortly.

At that moment he was summoned from the room by an attendant, as it was time for him to be on the alert for his music cue.

Dandy was standing close behind the curtain, pawing the ground with one foot and rubbing her nose against Blickett's hand.

Nick could hardly hold himself in check as his eye lighted on the rascal.

He looked around, but there was no sign of the general manager, who had promised to be on hand—nor did the few grooms passing here and there seem to have the least interest in Dandy and his attendant.

Nick was in a high state of nervous tension and hardly knew what to do.

Just at that moment the band blared for him to make his entrance.

But the boy, who usually dashed out at the first note, hesitated.

How could he leave his horse in that man's hands, knowing the rascal's deadly intentions?

A slight rustle close at hand attracted his gaze.

The face of Mr. Sheldon appeared above the straw of Dan Leno's donkey outfit.

The general manager waved Nick to enter the ring.

Thus reassured, the boy sprang through the folds of the curtain and was soon bowing before a portion of the big audience, who received him with a burst of applause.

A moment later Dandy came bounding into the ring alone, while, unknown to the people and those in the ring, a struggle was going on behind the curtain.

Blickett, at the moment Nick vanished through the curtain, put his hand in his pocket, and then, with a wary glance about him, raised it to the horse's mouth.

But his arm was seized and held in a vice-like grip, and, turning his head with a subdued oath, he found himself face to face with a big Irish groom, who yanked him away from the animal just as Mr. Sheldon came up.

Dandy looked wonderingly at the attendant, for the horse knew as well as if he were a human being that he should have been led into the ring at his young master's heels.

The general manager pulled the curtain aside and, slapping the stallion on its flank, cried, "Go!" and it darted out at once.

"Now, you scoundrel!" cried Mr. Sheldon to the trembling groom, "what have you in your hand?"

"Nothin'," gasped Blickett, with a frightened look in his eyes.

"Open his fingers, O'Brien, and let me see if he is telling the truth."

Blickett's fingers were forced apart and the deadly pill fell to the ground.

Mr. Sheldon picked it up and looked at it.

"What does this mean, Blickett?" he demanded, sternly.

But the groom was too overpowered to make any reply.

All he could do was to stare helplessly at the general manager.

"Call an officer," said Mr. Sheldon to an attendant, several of whom, together with a performer or two, had gathered around, wondering what the trouble was about.

"Are you going to own up, Blickett?" thundered the general manager. "I have been thoroughly posted about your dastardly intention to poison Long's valuable animal."

"It's a lie!" hissed the groom.

"Well, it's up to you to show that you are not guilty. I'm going to have that pill examined by a chemist. The conversation held between you and one of the performers in the menagerie tent about noon to-day was overheard. I'm afraid you're in a bad way. If you make a clean breast of the whole conspiracy I may let up on you a bit, but I won't make any promises."

Blickett turned a greenish yellow when the general manager uttered the foregoing words.

He realized that the game was up, and his craven soul sought a loophole for escape by exposing his associate in guilt.

"Jackson Parke put me up to it, sir," he replied, sullenly.

"Are you willing to swear to that?" demanded Mr. Sheldon, sharply.

"Yes; I am."

"You're an infernal liar!" cried Parke, who, with others, had been attracted to the scene of the disturbance, and he struck Blickett a staggering blow in the mouth, cutting his lip open.

The groom uttered a terrible oath, tore himself away from O'Brien and rushed upon Parke like a wild animal.

"Look out, Parke! He's got a knife in his hand," warned a brother professional.

Blickett had drawn and opened a nasty-looking jack-knife, and before the acrobat could dodge the infuriated man had buried it in his side.

"I'm stabbed!" exclaimed Parke, with a gasping cry, as he sank to the floor, at the instant O'Brien got a fresh hold on the maddened groom.

An officer appeared at this moment.

"Take this fellow in charge," said Mr. Sheldon. "I'll follow you to the police station as soon as I can get away. You can hold him for murderous assault as the case now stands."

Blickett, sullen and silent, was led away, and a physician was hurriedly summoned to attend to Jackson Parke, who seemed to have been desperately hurt.

And through it all Nick Long was going through his

wonderful exhibition in the ring hard by, amid the enthusiastic plaudits of the audience.

He and his noble steed seemed as one, so strong was the sympathetic attachment between the two.

When the band stopped, and the animal ran out of the ring, while his accomplished master bowed his acknowledgments again and again, Jackson Parke lay white and unconscious on a hastily prepared couch in the men's dressing-room, with a local doctor bending over him and shaking his head at the gravity of the wound.

"He's bleeding internally," said the physician to Mr. Sheldon. "A large artery has been severed, and he can live but a few moments."

The intelligence was gravely passed from lip to lip, and the women performers were most upset by the tragic occurrence.

Nick heard about it the moment he passed through the curtain and saw the little group of excited people canvassing the affair.

"Do you think he will die?" he asked, the anger he had felt against Parke fading from his mind.

"The doctor says it is only a question of a very little time."

It was at this moment the wounded acrobat opened his eyes.

"I feel awful bad," he said, faintly, to the physician. "Is the wound dangerous?"

"I regret to say it is," replied the doctor, so solemnly that Parke realized that he was in a bad way.

"Do you mean to say I am going to die?" he asked, earnestly.

"You can only live a very few minutes. You are bleeding internally."

"There is no hope, then?"

"None whatever."

"Is the manager here?"

"I am here, Parke," said Mr. Sheldon. "What can I do for you?"

"I wish to say I am guilty of the attempt to poison Dandy. I furnished Blickett with the bolus."

"I am sorry to know that, Parke," replied the general manager, gravely. "I am afraid you are paying the penalty."

"I want to see Long."

Word was passed for Nick.

"I should like to see Bessie Abbott, too," said the dying man.

She was immediately sent for, though Mr. Sheldon wondered in what way she figured in the case.

"I want you to forgive me, Long," gasped Parke. "I meant to kill your horse and injure you, because——"

A rush of blood to his lips stopped him.

"I forgive you freely, Parke," said Nick, earnestly. "And I hope God will also forgive you."

At that moment Bessie appeared.

She was white and nervous.

"I ask your forgiveness, too, Bessie, for annoying and——"

"I forgive you, Mr. Parke," she faltered, and then burst into tears.

He lifted her hand to his blood-stained lips, then there was a rattle in his throat, his head fell back, and the soul of Jackson Parke stood before his Maker.

CHAPTER XV.

IN WHICH OUR HERO MAKES THE DISCOVERY OF HIS LIFE.

"Congratulate me, Bessie," said Nick, two days later, at Bloomington, Ill. "I've turned up trumps."

"What do you mean, Nick?" she asked, in great curiosity.

"I've just received word from my real estate broker in New York that he has sold those lots in the Bronx for three thousand dollars each. I bought them two years ago at a bargain, paying only one hundred and fifty dollars apiece down and giving a mortgage for the other three hundred and fifty dollars."

"You had five of them, didn't you?" she asked, with sparkling eyes.

"Yes. They cost me altogether two thousand five hundred dollars; with interest and other expenses, say three thousand dollars. Now they have fetched fifteen thousand dollars. Profit, twelve thousand dollars, less commission and maybe other small expenses."

"I do congratulate you, Nick. I am awful glad to know you have done so well with that property, which some people thought wasn't going to amount to much."

"Of course you're glad, Bessie, for you've got a half-interest coming in all I make."

She blushed and pressed his hand.

"What are you going to do with so much money, Nick?"

"Well, with some of it I'm going to buy out Mr. Hiram Hanks' interest in the popcorn, peanut and other privileges attached to this show."

"You don't mean it!" she cried, opening her pretty eyes in surprise.

"I do mean it, Bessie."

"But you can't attend to it, Nick."

"Mr. Tooker and I have arranged that to our mutual satisfaction."

"Are you sure that it won't interfere with your regular work in the ring?"

"Quite certain, Bessie. Don't you worry. I'm out for the dollars and dimes."

"They seem to be coming your way lately with surprising haste," she replied, saucily. "First you get a present

of one thousand dollars from the management, now you have disposed of your lots at an enormous profit. What will it be next?"

"Next will be the profits of the firm of Long & Tooker."

"Well, I hope the profits will be bigger than the peanuts."

"What's the matter with the peanuts?"

"They're very small."

"Mr. Hanks bought them. Maybe we'll get bigger ones for next season."

"Then the lemonade is dreadfully watery," she said, with a covert smile.

"Did you taste any?"

"Not since I first joined the show."

"Then how do you know that the lemonade of Hanks & Tooker is watery?"

"It has that look."

"Circus caterers must be in the swim to make money. When our rich magnates are continually watering the stocks they put on the market, surely the circus man is entitled to water his stock in trade, too."

Bessie laughed.

Just then an attache stepped up and said that Long was wanted by Mr. Sheldon.

"Mr. Long," said the general manager, with a peculiar look on his face, "you will step down the street to the Empire House. A gentleman by the name of Bagley is very anxious to see you."

"I know Mr. Bagley, but I am not anxious to see him, sir," replied the boy.

"Well, I advise you to call at the hotel and see him now."

"Why so, sir?" asked Nick, in much surprise.

"I can't explain, Nick, beyond telling you that it will be greatly to your advantage to do so."

"Very well, sir."

Nick Long immediately took a car for the Empire House. Arrived there, he was shown up to one of the best rooms in the house.

Mr. Bagley, looking just as he always looked when he was attired in his Sunday clothes, answered his knock.

"Come right in, Nicholas, my dear boy," he said, effusively. "How could you leave us in such an abrupt manner? Here is Mr. Higgings, overseer of the poor farm. You remember him, of course?"

Nick remembered Mr. Higgings, and shook hands with him.

"Is this the boy, sir?" asked a tall, elegantly dressed gentleman, with gray hair and gold-rimmed eyeglasses, addressing the superintendent of the Salem poor farm.

"Yes, sir; this is the boy. I named him Nicholas Long, because no one knew his mother's real name. She died, as I have already told you, five hours after his birth. Have no doubt, sir, this is really your son, since you have shown to my satisfaction that the lad's mother was your wife."

Nick stared in wonderment while Mr. Higgings was speaking.

He had not thought about the mystery which shrouded his birth and identity for a long time.

In fact, he had long ago given up all hope of ever learning who he really was.

Now it looked as if the secret was about to be unraveled.

Was this fine, aristocratic-looking gentleman really his father?

He was not long kept in doubt.

The gentleman got up and approached him with much emotion.

"My dear boy," he began, "I know this is a great as well as unexpected surprise to you. Your dear mother, my wife, while traveling through Ohio to the home of her only sister, then at the point of death, was taken unexpectedly ill. She did not rally, and died in a few hours, leaving you behind. This I believe you already have been told. I was in Europe on a protracted business visit at the time, and when I got back the shock of the intelligence of your mother's death unhinged my reason, and I was taken to a private sanitarium, where I remained until nearly three years ago. Then I was pronounced well again. I at once started to find out all the particulars of my wife's death, with the determination to find her and bring her remains, so long forgotten in a country churchyard, to a New York cemetery. It was a difficult matter to follow up clues which time had faded, but I at length succeeded in locating the scene of her death at Salem. There I was told a son had been born, who had survived. I traced him to Mr. Bagley's farm, where he had been bound out by Mr. Higgings. I arrived at the farm the very afternoon you, my dear lad, for some reason I will not inquire into, ran away. I tried to trace your movements, but you had vanished as utterly as if you had dropped off the earth. Not until the other day, when I received a telegram from Mr. Bagley that he had got on your track, did I have the faintest hope of seeing and pressing to my heart my long-lost son."

"And you, sir, are really my father?" said Nick, his heart warming toward the fine-looking stranger.

"Yes. My name is George Wheatstone. Your right name, therefore, is Wheatstone."

We will draw the curtain on what followed.

It was a happy reunion between father and son.

It also brought certain advantages to Mr. Bagley and Mr. Higgings.

They both departed from Bloomington that afternoon with wads proportionate to the services they had rendered in bringing Nick and his father together.

Mr. Wheatstone, whether he was displeased or not to find his lost boy a circus professional, was too happy to find any fault with the stern fact.

He was present that afternoon at the show and witnessed the wonderful bareback performance of Nick on Dandy, and fairly held his breath at the apparently reckless chances the boy took to win the applause of the big audience.

Nick never rode better than he did under his father's eye, and we are bound say George Wheatstone was proud of him.

After the performance Nick introduced his father to Bessie Abbott, who was amazed at the news that her betrothed had actually found his father.

Reader, my story is finished.

At the conclusion of the season Nick closed his connection with the Great Occidental Show, and with the circus world, too, forever, for his father was wealthy, and there was no reason that he should follow his dangerous, though fascinating, calling any longer.

Bessie also retired from spangles and sawdust, and was received by George Wheatstone as his prospective daughter-in-law.

The day Nick and Bessie were married he received a letter from Mr. Sheldon, accompanying a present to the bride, the combined contribution from management and performers, congratulating them upon the happy culmination of the courtship.

It wound up with these words:

"We hope that as a benedict you will make as big a hit as you did with the Great Occidental Show, among whose attractions you were A SURE WINNER."

THE END.

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